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THE
POPULAR MEMBER,
THE WHEEL OF FORTUNE,
ETC.

BY MRS. GORE,

AUTHOR OF

“MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS,” “MRS. ARMYTAGE,”

“THE BANKER’S WIFE,” ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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BLANKS AND PRIZES;

OR,

THE WHEEL OF FORTUNE.

VOL. III.

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BLANKS AND PRIZES;

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THE WHEEL OF FORTUNE.

PART I.

CHEERFULLY overlooking the waters of the Severn, as if taking pleasure in the beauty of its site, and superior to the interested views usually arising from vicinity to a navigable river, stands the town of APSTON, or the town we intend to call Aps-ton; an airy spot, and a rural: for not only are the gardens of the spreading suburbs fair to see, and interspersed with what are called “genteel residences,” but, in summer-time, a very fair crop of grass makes its appearance in all but the Market Place. For Apston has only a single manufactory, to balance against a considerable number of widows in easy circumstances, and light-footed single ladies. The tranquillity of

the place appears to possess an almost conventional charm for the feeble sex.

No barracks, no manufacturing population, no colliers or miners within distance, to shake with their insubordination the foundations of this peaceful city of refuge. "The spinsters and the knitters in the sun," pursue their work unmolested ; and the spinsters and widow-ladies their whist, without fear of an intruder more dangerous than Dr. Toddles, the meally-mouthed physician-general of the neighbourhood, or old Mr. Mumbleton, the vicar. St. Ursula and her train might have set up their rest at Apston, without peril to their eleven thousand reputations.

Among the singlest of the single ladies, and residing in the house usually pointed out to strangers as the best in the town, was Miss Lavinia Meade ; a damsel who, for the last thirty years, had gone by the opprobrious title of old maid ; and who, born to a good fortune, had spent the greater part of her life in rendering it better. *Why*, it was hard to say ; for those who amass fortunes for their succes-

sors, have usually objects of affection to inherit their property; whereas, Miss Lavinia exhibited no sort of sympathy with her family or fellow-creatures. Her self-denying thrift, therefore, probably arose from an innate taste for hoarding.

But though supposed to spend only a fourth part of her income, and to waste no portion of even *that* on the superfluities of life, she not only took the goods the gods provided gratis, but took amazing care of them. The old-fashioned furniture bequeathed by her grandmother with her spacious house, was rubbed and scrubbed and burnished by her diligent hand-maidens, till it acquired a sort of ironical freshness, like the youthful airs of an old beau: and had the smallest particle of her curious old china come to mischance, or the smallest piece of her antique plate been missing, the magistrates of Apston would have heard of it. Her servants were charity-girls, taken from the poor-house, to be drilled into a knowledge of their duties: and that their drilling did credit to the crabbed old lady, was avouched by the specklessness of her

floors and brilliancy of her andirons. Miss Lavinia was as good a housewife as though there had been any one to applaud or profit by her housewifery. But not a human being took pleasure in the neatness and orderliness of her house, not even herself.

It was, however, at least an object of envy. Not one among the whist-playing widows but would have been thankful to exchange her narrow lodgings for the roomy and commodious mansion of Miss Lavinia Meade; and whereas on the gala evenings devoted to receiving the thrones and dominions of Apston, the mayor and his deaf wife, Dr. Toddles and his toadying sister, and a horde of minor misses of small account, the rich old maid gloried in an exhibition of her superior gentility and household treasures: there was some excuse for the covetous eyes with which many contemplated her establishment, and many more speculated, like Alexander's courtiers, on the future distribution of her inheritance.

For Miss Lavinia had no immediate relations. The nearest was an aunt, married in British America, of whose family little

was known at Apston; and the old lady had been so careful to circulate in the town that she could devise her property to whom she pleased, and that the public charities of Apston had better look to themselves, that her whole tea-drinking acquaintance were justified in trusting that the heirless old maid might win her way to heaven by loving at least *one* of her neighbours as herself.

In defiance, therefore, of wind and weather, and in spite of variabilities of temper characteristic of March rather than the usual simile of April, (for they changed not from sunshine to rain, and *vice versa*, but from rain to *sleet*,) her card-parties were sedulously attended. Every newspaper that reached Apston, was offered in succession to Miss Lavinia's perusal; and when it became evident to all that little world, that Miss Toddles, the Doctor's sister, had evil-spoken, lied, and slandered herself into paramount favour at the White House, a general outcry of indignation arose at the idea of that fine fortune of three thousand a-year passing from the hands of *one* stingy old skinflint into those of another.

Just, however, as the gossips of Apston, and Miss Hannah among the rest, had begun to look upon this dispensation as unchangeable, a name escaped the lips of Miss Lavinia Meade, unaccountably unfamiliar to the ears of her toadies. She began to talk of “my cousin, Captain Erskine ;” nay, even to accept the loan of newspapers on the plea of wishing to see whether the *Gazette* contained honourable mention of this hitherto unmentioned kinsman. For the Peninsular war was at its fiercest ; and there was every excuse for those who had captain-cousins, occasionally feeling hysterical at the blowing of the post-horn ; and no sooner had the Apstonians satisfied themselves that Captain Erskine was not a man of straw, that he had a local habitation in Lord Wellington’s camp and a name in the Army List, than they became agitated in their turn with sudden interest in the fortunes of the campaign ; and echoed with an unanimous “Amen !” the opinion of Miss Lavinia, that the advisers and maintainers of that bloody and devastating war, would have enough to answer for.

“To think of so many fine young men, the hopes of so many honourable families, sacrificing their valuable lives in behalf of a set of cigar-smoking, frowsy, priest-ridden Spaniards!” cried Miss Toddles, with a somewhat single-sided view of continental politics; upon which sympathetic hint, all the old ladies, far gone in their cups—of hyson or bohea—groaned in unison.

There were those, however, in Apston who whispered that Miss Toddles had appeared quite as much startled as her neighbours, on first hearing the name of Captain Erskine; and protested that all these lamentations over the perils of “fine young men, the heirs of prosperous families,” purported only to discover the nature of the old lady’s feelings and intentions towards her kinsman. But whatever curiosity either she or others might entertain on the subject, was soon appeased: for from that day forth, nothing but “Captain Erskine” was heard of at the White House. Whether, as some asserted, Miss Lavinia had only lately been made cognizant of his existence by a death-bed letter from her aunt, (a younger sister

of her mother, married to an American loyalist,) or whether she had kept the secret in her heart of hearts to be wreaked in vengeance at some moment of peculiar spite upon the aspirants to her inheritance, certain it is, that from the moment of avowal, she appeared as proud of the relationship as if no other woman in the world were cousin to a junior captain of light infantry.

It is true, no other at Apston happened to enjoy that distinction. Dr. Toddles had a brother, who was a half-pay colonel of marines ; and Mrs. Mumbleton a nephew, a lieutenant in the East India Company's service. But not a soul among Miss Lavinia's tea-drinkers, saving the stern hostess, had the smallest right to feel nervous at the issue of a second edition of *The Courier*. She was the only heroine akin to a Peninsular hero, throughout that quiet town.

In process of time, however, Captain Erskine came to be everybody's hero as well as her own. Every individual of the tabby coterie was familiar with his marchings and counter-marchings, his hair-breadth

'scapes, his hopes of promotion, his chances of leave of absence. The three little Misses Prebbles, nieces to the mayor, made spirited sketches of light-infantry officers, mauœuvring at the head of their companies, both on and off the field of battle,—all supposed to bear reference to Miss Lavinia's cousin; while the Toddleses were often heard to whisper, that if Captain Erskine obtained leave of absence, they only trusted no important movement of the French armies might take place while his services were withheld from the cause of his country! Though Wellington, in short, might be the hero of Great Britain, in the eyes of Apston, Erskine was the man.

At length, within a year of the "glorious termination" of the Spanish war, the gallant corps, of which Captain Erskine formed a part, was ordered home; that is, all that was left of the gallant corps: for, on its disembarkation at Portsmouth, there were scarcely men left to return, with an effective cheer, the warm salutations with which they were greeted by their fellow-countrymen on shore. Worn and torn, they looked like

anything rather than the victorious troops of the conqueror of the modern Cæsar.

Apston, however, still beheld them in its mind's eye as the *élite* of the British army; and, now that there was an immediate probability of an introduction to Captain Erskine, scarcely wondered at the triumphant joy of Miss Lavinia, or the zeal with which the gilt frames and looking-glasses of the White House were unpapered, and its lustres and girandoles released from their canvas-bags, in order to do honour to him who was about to do so great an honour to them all. The idea of possessing familiarly by their firesides a man still reeking from the smoke of the cannon of Soult,—a man fresh from the razing of cities and sacking of convents,—was almost too much for the sensibility of a circle to whom even a militia-officer was a rarity. The younger misses only trusted he might not prove *too* martial and ferocious for their susceptibility; the elder ones saw, with envious feelings, that Miss Lavinia was no longer ashamed, though her enemies spoke to her in the gate.

On the evening it was known that Captain Erskine would arrive at the White House by the London coach, all Apston held its breath with emotion. By the middle of the following day, one began to inquire of the other, whether the swash-buckler Captain had been seen, and whether civilians might presume to lift their eyes in his presence. When lo ! it transpired that the man, who was either the memorable cousin of Miss Lavinia or an impostor, was scarcely above the middle height, meagre in person, and sallow of countenance ; low-voiced as a woman, and shy as a girl ! Dr. Toddles protested there was no getting a word out of him ; and the three Misses Prebbles, who lodged opposite, insinuated that, instead of coming to Apston with *killing* intentions, the gallant Captain was evidently come there to die ; afflicted with an incipient jaundice, or far gone in a decline.

This was a sad falling off, and a terrible disappointment to Miss Lavinia. She, who had been squabbling with tax-gatherers and bullying church-wardens for the last three

years on the strength of her assertion, that, "though a lone woman, she had those who would take her part, and that her cousin Captain Erskine would never see her put upon," had scarcely patience to acknowledge the relationship of the poor enfeebled invalid, who, even in his best of times, could only have been five feet six. She felt humiliated in the person of her self-created Goliath !

There was, however, no help for it. She had threatened people too largely with her cousin, and boasted too loudly of her good intentions in his behalf, to disown him because he was slight and sickly ; and aware that, having no other relations in England, it was on her account and at her suggestion he had applied for three months' leave of absence, she set about contracting her ambition to his proportions, and making the best of a bad cousin. She would not afford so great a triumph to the malice of the Toddleses, as to reinstate her looking-glasses in their gauze-screens, or the lustres in their canvas-bags, till the White House had rendered honour due to Captain Erskine, *talis qualis*.

For, after all, insignificant as he might look, he *was* fresh from the field of glory; and though such silly little ladies as the Misses Prebbles might feel disappointed that he had not made his appearance in regimentals, he was unquestionably many degrees nearer the heroic than either the mayor, the vicar, or the apothecary.

The new-comer, meanwhile, little aware of all that had been expected of him, arrived at Apston, hoping to recruit his health and spirits after a harassing campaign, so as to enable him to return to a profession which occupied every ambition of his soul; knowing of the Miss Meade, by whom he had been so strenuously invited, only that she was the rich and heirless niece of his excellent mother, by whom, in her last moments, he had been enjoined to cultivate her goodwill. He came, therefore, without mistrust. Though ill and dispirited, he had experienced in too many professional emergencies the kindliness of the gentler sex towards a suffering soldier, not to feel assured of sympathy in one whose tenderness as a woman must be enhanced by congeniality of blood.

Perhaps, indeed, the Captain may have felt almost as much disappointed in the spare, rectangular, ungainly being who presented herself to his embraces under the name of "his cousin Lavinia," as Miss Lavinia had been in *her* cousin the Captain. But he was too amiable a man to let the slightest indication of surprise escape him. He came there to please and be pleased ; to conciliate as well as be coaxed into convalescence ; and readily resigned himself to play the longest rubbers of the longest possible whist, for the smallest possible stake. In a society, where he saw as great a preponderance of petticoats as the one he had just quitted exhibited of red coats, agreeable companionship could not be wanting. Though disappointed of a "lovely *young* Lavinia," the Apstonians could not *all* be old, sour, and ugly. After half-a-dozen years' hard fighting, he was, in short, easy to reconcile to a tea-table and an elbow chair.

The gentlemanly manners and yielding temper of Captain Erskine would perhaps have eventually found favour in the feline

eyes of his cousin, had not the defeated toady, on perceiving Miss Lavinia grow accustomed to his quiet presence at the White House, seized every occasion to twit her with the unenergetic tameness of her Bobadil; not as presuming to find fault with him on her own account, but expressing her regret that the valiant knight, on whom they had reckoned as so rampant a Romeo, should have sunk into the laughing-stock of the place! Miss Toddles protested that the Misses Prebbles had privately assured her, not one of *them* would accept him, were he worth a million per annum!

“No fear of their being tempted, I can promise them!” cried Miss Lavinia, in her shrillest tones; and from that day, though more pettish and fractious than usual with the gentle invalid, she began to drop hints among her female friends, that the young ladies of Apston need not look *quite* so disparagingly upon a man who, if not an Adonis, was heir-presumptive to three thousand a-year!

And now, Captain Erskine had indeed a hard time of it. Between the peevishness

of the old maid, who treated him almost as a dependant, and the forced civilities of her associates, he felt thoroughly disgusted. More than two months, however, remained unexpired of his leave; and with only his pay to depend upon, and the remembrance of his mother's dying injunction, he felt that he must bear and forbear with his kinswoman.

It was luckily summer time; and there were the woods, and fields, and animated waters of the Severn, to diversify his walks. Between the river and the ledgy cliffs rising high above, was a winding path on a margin of short green turf, which, at three quarters of a mile from the town, was cut short by the fall of a rapid brook into the Severn. But over the brook was a wooden bridge, connecting the two sides of the narrow valley severed by its waters; a valley of fertile meadows, now compressed by a rocky gorge, now opening with outspreading verdure, through which the little brook meandered like a truant idling away its time, and loath to leave those pleasant pastures, with their thickets of alder and

maple, and the gay profusion of wild flowers which water-meadows are apt to engender.

This secluded valley was a favourite resort of Captain Erskine; perhaps, because out of distance for the elderly ladies of Apston, while even the younger ones preferred the frequented promenades in the suburbs of the town. He took care never to *ask* them why they never bent their steps so far as the Bournefields; and once, when the spot was alluded to at the White House tea-table, spoke of it as damp and dreary,—so that he enjoyed his favourite walk all to himself, that is, almost to himself: for once or twice he had noticed there a meanly-dressed young girl, as insignificant-looking as himself, who appeared to be carrying a parcel, as if employed in business.

One very oppressive afternoon, he found her seated halfway in the valley, under shelter of one of the thickets of maple-bushes; and as thunder was beginning to growl in the distance, apprised her, as a mere act of charity, that a heavy storm was coming on, and that a few hundred yards further

up the valley, was a house that might afford her better security. Deeply colouring, and apparently too much alarmed at being spoken to, to reply or resist, she rose from the ground, and followed Captain Erskine's directions at so rapid a pace, that when, some minutes afterwards, he availed himself of the same shelter, he found her already installed with the old cress-woman, the proprietress of that wretched abode, to whom she was apparently well known.

"I told ye awhile go, Miss Margaret, my dear," said the poor woman, familiarly, yet respectfully, "that thunner was coming on, and you'd best bide wi' me till a'ter the storm. But you wouldn't be guided."

"I was in hope of getting home before the rain began," replied the young girl, neither refusing nor accepting the wooden stool pushed towards her by Captain Erskine; but standing beside it, and peering through the small window of the hovel, as if to examine the weather, not very easy to be scrutinized through the cracked and clouded panes. Soon, however, the storm commenced in fearful earnest; and the cot-

tage was so frightfully shaken to its foundation by every fresh peal, that all ceremony among its inmates was thrown aside. Margaret, whoever she might be, hastily flung off her bonnet, and covering her face with her hands, knelt down on the clay-floor, concealing it, either in prayer or agony, against the seat she had rejected; while Captain Erskine was occupied in surmising what would be the result should the electric fluid set fire to the thatch, the lurid flashes seeming every moment to reach the threshold of the hovel which they illumined with fearful brightness.

But either the prayers of Margaret, or the helplessness of the poor old cress-woman, propitiated the genius of the storm. Though at the first outburst it seemed concentrated on that devoted spot, by degrees, the crashing thunder followed less immediately the momentary glare, diminishing alike in violence and frequency. During these pauses, the loud pattering of the rain was now distinctly heard. At length, even the rain seemed to abate. The growling march of the storm had evidently outstripped the

limits of the valley ; and when Captain Erskine ventured to open the cottage-door, and look out without hazard of alarm to its trembling inmates, so sweet and refreshing an air burst in to relieve the stifling atmosphere of that close chamber, that an ejaculation of general thankfulness was irrepressible.

Margaret rose from her knees, and joined him on the threshold ; and while the shower still fell heavily beyond the eaves, all within was so calm, so sheltered, that, instead of warning her from the open air, he stood smilingly congratulating the young stranger upon her release from her panic. But he did not smile long. He saw, from the redness of her eyes, that she had been really weeping, and from the gravity of her brow, that she had been absorbed in prayer. Moreover, the old woman was muttering in her tremulous voice allusions to Mount Sinai and the manifestations of Jehovah in the olden time, which rendered jesting out of place. So Captain Erskine contented himself with speaking kindly instead of jokingly to his new friend : for friends they

already were. After that storm and those tears, it was impossible to feel himself a stranger to Margaret. She was no longer the shy girl who sat pulling the beard from an ear of rye-grass, under the maple bushes; but a gentle creature, to whom he had whispered words of solace when shrinking from the terrors of the voice of God.

While assisting her to tie on her bonnet, he had occasion to remark the delicacy of her features. She was not a beauty, perhaps; but she was pleasanter to look upon than a score of beauties; and though still apprehensive that she belonged to the working-class, it *could* not be to a class of *very* hard workers; for her hands were slender and white, and smooth as alabaster. He could not be mistaken on that point,—having contrived to hold one of them some seconds within his own when assisting her from her kneeling position.

When the moment of sunshine came that fully justified her departure for the town, Erskine was divided between his desire to bear her company by the way, and his wish to remain behind and cross-question their

poor old hostess. A little management reconciled both temptations. While offering the old woman a pecuniary acknowledgment of her civility, he lingered longer to receive her thanks than was his wont on such occasions, in order to obtain an answer to his question of—"Does *Miss Margaret* belong to Apston?"

"Where else should she belong to, after being born and bred there!" was the unpolished reply. "Though, having her own living to get, poor young lady, ever sin' the death of her father, (who was master to the grammar-school, and left her bitter bread, and little enough on't,) she might as well have set up in business elsewhere. Hows'ever, the ladies, she says, begins to employ her; and well they may; for a sweeter, more charitabler young lady never trod the earth. My sons, now at sarvice, were scholars to her poor father: and so she's apt to stop here and rest o' days, on her way up to Hobart's Farm, when she carries home her work."

This was enough for Erskine. He determined *not* to enter Apston with the poor

young girl, seeing that she was in a condition of life to be injured in reputation by his attentions. Yet, somehow or other,—either because the path being slippery from the rain, Margaret loitered by the way, or because he found it difficult to slacken his usual soldierly pace,—before ten minutes had elapsed they were walking side-by-side; nay; more than side-by-side, arm-in-arm! But this was decidedly the fault of the slipperiness of the path, which rendered it dangerous for the young girl to traverse the wooden bridge without support. Arrived on *terra firma* at the opposite side, they probably forgot to separate.

But Captain Erskine was more to blame than his companion; for before they parted, he managed to ascertain on what day Margaret had promised to carry home her work to the farm: evidently not with the intention of avoiding the Bournefields at the moment specified. It required more than light-infantry philosophy to withstand such a temptation.

In spite of the stunning storm and the wet grass, he had, in fact, been spending

the pleasantest morning he had enjoyed since his arrival at Apston. After the shrill voice of his cousin, after the frightened looks of her household, after the silly affectations of the Misses Prebbles, and the spiteful emptiness of the rest of the White House coterie, the mild and unaffected deportment of Margaret was as refreshing to his heart, as the soft outline of her youthful features to his eyes. To meet with a woman, a *womanly* woman, after consorting with that horde of tabbies, was a temptation beyond any inflicted upon St. Antony of Padua.

It happened just then that the old matron of Hobart's Farm and her comely daughters, must have been more than usually in want of replenishment for their wardrobe ; or that Margaret's mantua-making was sorely in need of alteration. For almost every day, certainly every *fine* day, she had occasion to carry home work, or bring away orders. And it would appear as if, unwilling to lose time on the road, she devoted it to a course of botany : for if the old cress-woman, the sole inhabitant of that secluded valley, had

been inclined to make observations, she could not have failed to perceive that, irri-
guous as were the windings of the brook,
Miss Margaret and her new friend preferred
following them to the utmost, for the sake
of having the waterflowers (of which they
were doubtless discoursing) nearer at hand,
than to keep to the pathway. Except,
indeed, that Margaret occasionally cast down
her eyes upon a bunch of forget-me-nots,
bluer than the rest, presented to her by her
preceptor, she seemed to give no great at-
tention to his lessons. But Erskine must
have been a grave teacher; for he was a man
who seldom smiled; and, but that there was
a gentleness in his voice, more encouraging
than the warmest compliment, might have
passed for a man of cold and reserved temper.

No need, however, to pry into the wan-
derings of the inoffensive couple. The old
cress-woman, and the swallows that skimmed
the brook before their faces with as little
fear or reverence, as before the alder bushes,
were alone cognizant of their growing friend-
ship: let us emulate their discretion, and
keep the counsel of the lovers.

The venerable cottager, indeed, unversed in social etiquette, thought it strange, perhaps, that Miss Margaret, who had a quiet comfortable room of her own, (over the upholsterer's in the Market Place at Apston,) should prefer receiving lessons in botany, in the open air, exposed to vicissitudes of weather, and with only a mossy bank to rest on, when tired of rambling. The swallows, perhaps, were wiser. But no matter.

Meanwhile, so far from the pleasant rambles of Captain Erskine in the Bournefields rendering him less patient under the thwartings of his maiden aunt, or less courteous to the circle of her tabby friends, his nature seemed to become milder than ever, under the influence of a heartfelt passion. His growing affection for his poor Margaret—poor and simple, but neither unlettered nor unrefined—seemed to inspire him with indulgence for the failings of her whole sex. He could not expect, indeed, that the Misses Prebbles, the vain daughters of a silly mother, should have received so solid an education as the schoolmaster's child ; nor was his rich old cousin, spoiled into selfish-

ness from her very cradle, likely to emulate the saintliness of spirit of one accustomed to the buffets of Fortune, yet so conscious of her own incompetency to resist them, that she preferred stitching for her bread in her native place, to the hazard of harsh usage among strangers as a teacher or governess.

And so, Captain Erskine's increased deference towards the tiresome old lady, and the consideration with which he did not suffer even his course of botany to interfere with due submission to her hours and domestic arrangements, so softened her feelings in return, that towards the end of his leave of absence, she began to count the days as anxiously as himself. Not one of the old ladies, from the vicarage downwards, (with the exception of Toady Toddles,) but had observed to her, "I'm sure, Ma'am, I don't know what we shall do when the Captain is gone: the Captain is the life and soul of our parties." And though the Prebbles' trio whispered apart, that "it was but *still* life after all," Miss Lavinia heaved a sigh as she reflected upon the dreariness of her cousinless days to come.

Just, however, as she was on the point of inquiring whether an extension of leave were out of the question, there arrived, per post, a letter of extra dimensions, yet free of postage, bearing printed on the address, "*On His Majesty's Service*;" and within, an intimation from the Horse-Guards, that his Majesty's service had no further need of the second battalion of the gallant corps to which Captain Alexander Erskine had the honour to belong.—At Christmas it was to be disbanded.

This was a terrible blow to one who had been fighting the flesh off his bones for six years in Spain; and whose face was still sallow with privation and toil. For he knew that he had not sufficient interest at the Horse-Guards to get on active service again, at a moment when so many officers were thrown on their own resources by the arrangements of the peace establishment; and lo! there was nothing before him but half-pay, and a few hundreds of prize-money, and what was at that period emphatically called blood-money, still due for the sufferings of his Peninsular campaign.

“But your old uncle, Sir John Erskine?” suggested Miss Lavinia, the agitation of his feelings having betrayed to her the nature of the communication he had received.

“My old uncle has little interest with the present administration, and no parliamentary influence. Government, in rewarding his services with a baronetcy, thought it had done enough. Nor is he able to assist me otherwise than in my profession. Sir John has three young unmarried daughters to provide for.”

Miss Lavinia preserved an awful silence. Her grisly eyebrows were elevated, and her severe mouth primly pursed up, as much as to say, “Expect no liberalities from me.” But it was not of *her* the disbanded Captain was thinking at that moment.

After a cheerless pause, during which the clicking of the old-fashioned buhl clock on the mantel-piece became as audible as at dead of night, the weird-woman suddenly exclaimed, “Cousin! when I thought you were going to wish me good-bye in a day or two, I felt lonesomer at the notion of parting from you, than I ever expected to feel at the loss of any living companion. Your

ways suit me, Captain Erskine. You give little trouble in the house, and make no noise ; and, betwixt friends, I should not mind having you for a permanent inmate, if it were not for the evil tongues of this wicked world.”

A blush, deep enough to be visible even through the sallowness of his complexion, overspread the cheeks of the soldier. To live and die at Apston was certainly just then the height of his ambition. But a terrible suspicion glanced into his mind during the second clause of the old damsel’s address, that she was desirous of drawing yet closer the ties of relationship between them. As he glanced towards her hard, perpendicular figure, and a countenance furrowed with all that is meanest of the cares and solitudes of life, the notion of *such* a Mrs. Alexander Erskine caused his blood to curdle.

But he was speedily undeceived. “ For this, however,” she primly resumed, “ there is a remedy. I am getting in years, cousin ; and, as it will probably please Providence to assign me length of days, (as to my forefathers before me,) I cannot deny that it

might be a comfort to have companions of my own kith and kin about me, in place of interested folks, who have no thought but feathering their nests by the plucking of mine. Nay, it might be even a pleasure to see a younger generation growing up around me. Though I have chosen to avoid, on my own account, the cares of a family, I am not averse to children ; especially such as I should have a right to inspect in the rearing."

Captain Erskine's heart thrilled within him. Yet he scarcely dared give way to the delicious hopes, the charming prospects, opening around him.

"In short, cousin," resumed the spinster, with a grim smile, "not to waste more breath upon the matter, what I have to say is—MARRY ! and your wife and family have a home ready provided for them at the White House. All I expect in her is a cheerful companion, willing to make herself pleasant and useful, so long as my time lasts, and calculated to do honour to my name and place ; which she will inherit after I am gone to a better world."

Breathless from emotion, Captain Erskine scarcely knew to which first to dedicate his thanks,—to Providence or his generous cousin. While he was still pressing his lips to her bony hand, she continued ; and for once, her harsh, creaking voice, was music to his ear.

“ I have always a little fund laid up at the Apston bank, for a rainy day,” said she. “ As many hundreds as may be necessary to make a merry wedding, shall be placed to your account. I do not mean to do things *skimpingly*. Dr. Toddles and his sister are fond of hinting, when my back is turned, that with *my* fortune, I ought to cut a better figure in the world. I mean to show them, ay, and others in Apston too, who shall be nameless, that, when occasion needs, I do not lose sight of my family credit.”

“ My dear Madam,—my dear cousin !”—faltered Captain Erskine, deeply penetrated by such unlooked-for generosity.

“ The only point on which I have to restrict you,” said she, interrupting his demonstrations, “ is your choice of a wife. I am not so narrow in my notions, as to

fancy there is any one in Apston worthy to share the noble fortune I destine for you. The Misses Prebbles shall learn, to their cost, that *my* heir may go further and fare better in his selection."

Captain Erskine was about to reply; but Miss Lavinia chose to be heard to an end.

"You spoke just now," said she, "of Sir John Erskine's daughters. You have often mentioned them before, as pretty, and pretty-behaved young ladies, presented at court, and moving in the circles becoming their birth. Among the three, it is hard but you find one to suit you, and whom you will suit. Hasten therefore to London; make your choice, and pursue your courtship with fitting discretion; and when the time comes to disclose your inclinations to your uncle, inform him that your mother's family is somewhat better to do in the world than your father's; and that your nearest maternal kinswoman is content to settle a thousand per annum upon your bride. What you may both inherit at her death, will be contingent on your future behaviour."

Miss Lavinia naturally prepared her bony

hand for a repetition of the salutation already imprinted. But Captain Erskine's lips were ready neither with kisses nor thanksgivings. He was paralyzed ! It was but natural his cousin should conclude it to be from joy.

“ I shall like to hear what Apston will be pleased to say to my family arrangements,” pursued the old maid, “ when you bring down to the White House a Mrs. Alexander Erskine, who has been presented at court, and who, as a baronet's daughter, will take precedence of Mrs. Mumbleton and the mayor's lady. And then the Misses Prebbles,—not one of whom would marry you with a million a-year !—eh ?—let us see which of them will not be thankful to dance at your wedding.”

Impossible to look less like a bridegroom than the poor cousin at that moment. Pale as death from sudden revulsion of feeling, tears quivered in his eyes, and his lips quivered with emotion.

It was a terrible story he had to tell ; and judicious would he have been to postpone the relation to some future moment. But lovers are seldom judicious. Moreover, he

seemed to feel that it would be a sin to deceive, even for an hour, the relative so nobly disposed in his favour. A storm of reproaches for the ignominiousness of his choice, he must, of course, confront. But storms (whether in the Bournefields or White House) are of limited duration; and in the end, Miss Lavinia could not fail to become softened towards a being so pure and gentle as his beloved Margaret. In *her*, the kind old lady would find fiftyfold as much companionship as in one of the fashionable daughters of Sir John Erskine. Margaret would comfort her benefactress, in sickness and in health, as she had already promised to comfort *him*! Margaret would be as a daughter to her old age. Margaret would be a blessing to her household. Margaret,—Margaret, who was an angel!

And so he actually took courage to relate the whole history of his loves; his troth-plight; his certainty of future happiness; and confidence in the eventual satisfaction of his kinswoman at his disinterested choice. Absorbed in the details of his narrative, he had not leisure to note that Miss Lavinia

was now as breathless from stupefaction as he had been himself a few minutes before, or that her face was becoming livid with suppressed rage.

At length a few muttered accents escaped her pale lips ; among which Captain Erskine could distinguish — “ a mantua-maker ! a sewer of seams !—the daughter of an insolent schoolmaster ! Those Prebbles girls judged him truly, after all. Pitiful ! pitiful ! pitiful ! ”

Infuriated as she was, however, Miss Lavinia was resolved to do the amplest justice. Instead of giving way to her temper or her prejudices, she generously gave a choice to her cousin ; offering to overlook the insult to herself and roof conveyed by the infamous connexion he had been carrying on with what she was pleased to term “ the very dregs of the people,” and confirm all her noble predispositions in his behalf, on condition of his breaking off his acquaintance with the worthless creature he had presumed to name in her presence, and undertaking to pay his addresses to one of the three Miss Erskines.

The consequence of this liberal proposition was, that within an hour "my cousin the Captain" found the door of the White House closed upon him for ever, and his prospects of inheritance vanished like a dream. In taking possession of the shabby lodgings becoming his future condition of life as a half-pay officer, without fortune and without a home, he had nothing he could call his own but the baggage which an accompanying truck deposited at the door.

A month afterwards, and his property was increased by the possession of a lovely and amiable wife. After a due publication of their banns in Apston church, he had gratefully received the hand of MARGARET.

PART II.

TWELVE months passed away after the grand family catastrophe at the White House, which afforded so endless a variety of texts to the gossips of Apston ; and they would, perhaps, have found newer subjects for discussion, but for the almost insulting obstinacy with which Captain and Mrs. Erskine thought proper to settle themselves in a spot where their misdoings were so much a matter of notoriety. Without the fear of his indignant cousin before his eyes, the kind-hearted soldier had conceded to the prejudice of his gentle bride in favour of her birth-place. His own colonial origin afforded him no ties to any other part of England ; and it was consequently in Apston that he hired the *very* small house, which his *very* small fortune enabled him to furnish for her reception.

Wiser would it have been, perhaps, had the young couple adhered to their lodgings. For it is difficult for a man, inexperienced in housekeeping, not to be tempted to exceed his means in providing for the domestic comfort of the object of his adoration; and Margaret had seen so little comfort, and deserved so much, that it appeared doubly incumbent upon her happy husband to consult his inclinations in her behalf, rather than his fortunes. Not that there was any great outlay or extravagance in that modest habitation; but it would have been better to keep their small sum of ready money at their disposal, for the emergencies of after-life. What lover in his honeymoon, however, can be expected to think of after-life?

Perhaps, in the secrecy of his soul, Captain Erskine still reckoned on the partiality of his rich cousin. Miss Lavinia had no surviving relation but himself; and it was difficult for a man deducing his notions of the sex from a being gentle and charitable as Margaret, to conceive it possible for a woman to be wholly unrelenting.

Little did he know of the arid nature of that loveless and joyless being ; and little surmise of the designing malevolence with which her bitter spirit was daily aggravated against him and his young wife, by Miss Toddles ;—never weary of dwelling upon the luxurious manner in which her cousin the Captain was furnishing his new house ; and the air of impenitent self-satisfaction apparent in the face of Mrs. Erskine, when occasionally met upon her husband's arm, strolling on the banks of the Severn (perhaps returning from Bournefields). “No lady born and bred,” she observed, “could lead an idler life than the promoted mantua-maker.”

Now, had Miss Lavinia been informed that her despised relative pursued her old vocation, or showed peculiar aptitude for domestic drudgery, she would as surely have imputed it to her as a fault, and arising from her humble origin, as she now affected disgust at her airs of gentility.

“There is one great comfort,” said she, musing to herself after listening to accounts of this malicious description. “They will

come to beggary!—They will assuredly come to beggary! One child already born,—doubtless half-a-dozen to follow; and all to be fed, in these hard times, out of a Captain's half-pay! Ay, ay! they will come to beggary; and then, in the midst of their misery and starvation, let them apply to *me*, and see what will come of it!”

On quitting her house to renew the offer of his hand to Margaret at the penalty of disinherittance, Captain Erskine had of course determined, not alone, that he never *would* apply to her for assistance, but that nothing should induce him to hold the smallest communication with her of any kind. But on the birth of his little girl, in the almost frantic exultation of finding himself a father, when, for twenty-four hours past, he had been on the brink of finding himself a widower,—his better feelings overmastered his resentment. In his wild extremity of joy, after contemplating the young mother and her lovely infant, he wished to be in charity with all the world,—he wished all the world to be as happy as himself; and under the influence of this Christianly senti-

ment, sat down and indited a letter to his kinswoman, acquainting her with the happy event, and entreating that all recollection of offence might be banished between them.

Unluckily, Toady Toddles was at hand when these overtures of peace reached the White House, to suggest further implacability, and point out the interested motives of this tardy act of submission.

“They want you to stand godmother to the mantua-maker’s brat, my dear Ma’am,” said she. “They will be inviting you next to drink caudle, and serve it to you, perhaps, —he, he, he!—in *thimbles*! Excuse me, my dear friend; but I cannot bear to see you so imposed upon.”

And lo! the toady hardened Miss Lavinia’s heart; and she returned back Captain Erskine’s letter in a blank envelope. He never wrote again; not even when, at the end of his second year of marriage, he found himself father of a son.

And now, the struggles of the happy pair were beginning. For if scarcely able to support themselves at first on their small pittance, how were they to make it suffice

for four, nay, for *five*, instead of two? For though Margaret was proud as ever to officiate in the most menial offices for the husband who had sacrificed so much for her sake, the services of a domestic were essential to the children while their mother was laid up. Yet, (as she sometimes said to Farmer Hobart's family, and others of her former customers who had never lost sight of her,) "Alexander was worth twenty nurses; so kind, so thoughtful, so attentive, so patient!" and it was really surprising, considering the former habits of the manly soldier, how handy he contrived to make himself in the little household; superior to no office which it was a relief to his overtasked wife to find taken off her hand. The elder of the Misses Prebbles, who had married a rich attorney, and several other ladies of the wealthier class of Apstonians, could not refrain from glancing, with an eye of envy, at the wife of one whose devotedness and serviceability transpired through some of those inexplicable cracks and fissures that betray the secrets of éven the most domestic privacy. Any one of them would have ex-

changed her joyless luxury, to be waited on as Margaret was waited on—to be loved as Margaret was loved.

Erskine was, fortunately, of a mechanical turn ; and the chances of his foreign campaigns had often compelled him to turn his abilities to account. Now, there was some pleasure in rendering them available. To promote the comfort of his wife and children, was a purpose worth working for ; and often, when his neighbours were enjoying their summer pastimes, the hammer of his workshop might be heard, constructing furniture for his little nursery, or toys for its grateful inmates. Once or twice, when an old brother officer visited him in his retreat, though civil enough to congratulate the half-pay Captain on the joys of his domestic life, and his good fortune in being able to do so much for its promotion, he quitted Apston full of secret compassion towards the man who had been compelled to exchange field-days for nursery cares, and the bustle of a garrison life for the drudgery of a cabinet-maker.

For though the taste of the happy couple

for botany was strong as ever, they had no leisure to indulge it. No summer rambles *now* in the green pastures of Bournefields,—no stooping after the myosotis, no poetizing upon the reckless flight of the swallows. It was too far to drag the children,—too far to admit of leaving them behind during so long an absence; and Margaret had so much mending and making to get through for her darlings, (more *mending*, however, than making,) that even during the sultry summer weather, she was often forced to deny herself the enjoyment of fresh air. The old cress-woman at the cottage had been dead nearly a year, before the Erskines so much as heard a word about the matter.

All this, however, Margaret assured her husband was no privation to *her*. She had been accustomed from her early years to sit at home over her needlework. The natural habits of her life were sedentary. All she desired was, that he who was otherwise accustomed, would not forego his usual exercise on her account. It gave her sufficient pleasure, she assured him, to know that he,

at least, was enjoying the summer verdure of the woods, and freshness of their dear old Severn.

And when, in compliance with her entreaties, he took his hat, and indulged himself with a stretch across the fields, then was the time for her most arduous industry. During his absence, she would set about a thousand miserable little tasks of reparation, which she knew it humiliated him to see her perform ; and before he found his way home again, his workshop was cleaned out and set in order, or his wretched wardrobe refreshed by some of those expedients of good housewifery, usually devised and practised by a wife so good and thoughtful as to deserve better fortunes than necessitate their practice. Poor Erskine was sure, on his return, to find his house swept and garnished, and smiling faces awaiting him on the threshold.

Sometimes, indeed—for the eye of affection is terribly discerning—he fancied he could perceive, amid all those cheering smiles and affectionate services, the trace of tears on the eyelids of his dear Margaret.

But the conjecture did not inspire even a momentary fear that she loved him less than formerly, or was less happy in slaving for him and for her children. He guessed exactly the truth; that when he was not present to be grieved by the sight of her weeping, she no longer restrained her bitter consciousness of the alarming poverty threatening their little household,—that her sickness would be fatal to their comfort,—that his death would render her a widow indeed,—that, little as they had to live upon,—for their children's sake, they must not, *must not* die! Nay, so fully did he understand the generous dispositions of his wife, that he fancied he could see her, after reflections dispiriting as these, suddenly brush away her tears, resume her courage, invoke, for self-support, her duty as a mother, her tenderness as a wife,—then resume, with renewed industry and cheerfulness, the trivial offices of life.

But even poor Erskine, with all the closeness of his sympathy, could not so fully enter into the meditations of Margaret, as to overhear her reviling herself, as he might

have done, for having withdrawn him from his prosperous career of professional duty, into that depth of adversity. “*He* was not born for all this!” she would falter, while holding one infant to her bosom, and with her foot rocking the cradle of an elder child; “*he* has the spirit of a prince; *he* was intended for a manly life; for all the pleasures and pursuits of a gentleman. How shall I ever forgive myself for having degraded him from his condition to this wretchedness?”

Still, even after such heart-aching moments as these, she contrived to be cheerful when he came back to her, glowing from the fresh air of the country, and bringing hedge-flowers or fruit for the children, the produce of his walk; just as *he* described only the pleasures and incidents of his expedition, without adverting to the heaviness of spirit which had prevented him from really enjoying the elasticity of the atmosphere, or the cheering influence of the summer sun. They hoarded their griefs from each other,—as though the only possessions they had not generosity enough to share in common.

Sometimes, when some sharper necessity than usual brought the frightfulness of poverty to stare them in the face, Margaret was on the brink of asking her husband's permission to return to her old vocation. She might serve him better, she thought, by working on hire for strangers, than by working for him and his. Still, she had hitherto found courage to refrain. Not that she was debarred by pride, or any sense of superiority to her former condition; but she exulted too truly in bearing his name, not to recoil from the idea of degrading *his* children by the humiliation of their mother. Erskine's son was an object of worship in the eyes of poor Margaret.

Such were their struggles; supported with all the fortitude of a strong affection; for there is no courage so great as that which has its roots in the heart of another. They never complained, either to themselves, each other, or the world; perhaps because aware that, *in* the world, nobody would have cared a jot for their complaining. On the contrary, when the scarlet fever was in their house, and Toady Toddles (whose brother

had been called in by the parish apothecary) apprised Miss Lavinia that it was likely enough she might soon have to wear mourning for the plebeian wife of her cousin, the maiden lady observed, that "it would be a mercy if the disease were to carry off two or three of their half-starved children; but that not a shred of mourning should ever enter *her* house in behalf of anything akin to the quondam milliner of the Market Place."

Perhaps it might be her ill-will that prospered the poor babies; for they struggled through their fearful malady: and their poor parents thanked Heaven on their knees as heartily for their preservation, as though the remainder of their little lives were not to be labour and sorrow. But what parents think of such things, when smoothing the pillow of a convalescent child? They lived, which was enough for thankfulness. He who findeth meat for the young ravens, would provide sustenance for them hereafter.

Nevertheless, when the claims collected by that heavy sickness came to be enforced,

—when the severity of a hard winter added its pangs to the privations created by a summer of affliction,—when Margaret, who had often seen her husband silently deny himself the necessaries of life, found him sometimes compelled to withhold them from herself, in order that there might be enough for the children,—she turned aside her head in agony, that she might not be forced to look upon the ghastliness of his face.

All her own little possessions she had long made away with; a few sets of richly-bound books, presents to her father from his favourite pupils, a few articles of plate, family devisals to her mother. What remained to them was the property of poor Erskine—little enough, indeed—but certain trinkets and trifles of family inheritance, with which it would have been painful to him to part. But she saw that the time was coming when these must go. They had no debts; but between the present and the day for the quarterly payment of his miserable half-pay, (the Golconda of their starvation,) there must come a moment for them to have recourse to a credit, hard to

obtain in circumstances such as theirs ; or the sacred treasures connected with the memory of the dead must be defiled.

Yet from the half-warmed, half-fed, half-furnished house in which these grievous considerations were perpetually agitated, was visible the roof of the rich cousin ; who, if clothed neither in purple nor fine linen, might have luxuriated in the vesture of a queen, without injury to her over-brimming coffers. And the sufferings of the Erskines were fully known to Miss Lavinia. Her toadies were well aware that she took as much pleasure, as people in general take offence, in being talked to about her “poor relations.” They could not be *too* poor to please her. It was delightful to hear of Captain Erskine having been seen in a threadbare coat, drawing along the river-path towards the Bournefields a little cart constructed by himself for his children, and containing three of them.

“There is a fifth coming, I’m told !” added one of the tabby chorus. “Much good may it do the workhouse ; for to *that* they must all come.”

“No such thing!” retorted the malignant old cousin. “There is an alternative. Captain Erskine, who has long forfeited all claims to the name and appearance of a gentleman, has sold his sword, I am told, and will doubtless soon mortgage his half-pay. Still, there is a resource for the family. The schoolmaster’s daughter may set up shop again, and take in dress-making; that is, if people can be found rash enough to trust her with their materials.”

Soon afterwards, the gossip of Apston announced the birth of the fifth sharer of the scanty sustenance of the Erskines; and the fact that, for want of proper assistance, the mother of that helpless little family had nearly lost her life.

Under this trying circumstance, no one was surprised at the pertinacity with which the poor family kept the house. For weeks they were neither seen nor heard of; and as they could not *all* have been translated at once to a higher sphere, curiosity began to be excited concerning the origin of their seclusion. If Captain Erskine were put in prison, it must be for some old debt else-

where, for he owed not a guinea at Apston ; and *if* such a catastrophe had occurred, the news would certainly have transpired in the town.

“ Something out of the common must have happened to those Erskines,” observed Mrs. Latitat, the former Miss Prebbles, one evening, over a pool of commerce at the White House, which purported to enliven the party. “ As I passed their pigeon-hole of a house, this afternoon, I observed all the window-shutters closed.”

“ *I* could have told you as much yesterday,” added one of her sisters, “ had I considered such people worth speaking of.”

“ I should think one of the family must be dead,” added Mrs. Latitat.

“ Likely enough ; as they have nothing to *live* upon,” interposed Miss Lavinia, who had just accepted a life of grace, and was again dealing.

“ Why, bless my soul !” exclaimed old Mrs. Mumbleton, (whose vicarage gates commanded a view of the Erskines’ habitation,) “ is it possible that you are none of you aware of what has occurred to them ?

(Miss Toddles, my dear Ma'am, I'll trouble you to pass me that ten of clubs). I promise you, ladies, you have seen the last of them."

"And no great loss either," cried Miss Toddles, perceiving that her patroness was speechless from curiosity. "But how, my dear Ma'am, (I am going to give a *great* card, I throw out the knave of diamonds :) *how* will you guarantee us *that*?"

"Because they have left Apston for ever! —Tens!—I expected as much—ace out against me!—Just like my luck.—Mrs. Latitat goes up."

Even above the confusion of the game, however, rose the shrill interrogations of their hostess. "*Where* were the Erskines gone? *When* did they go; and *why*? *What* could possibly have become of them; and who had afforded them the means of departure?"

All Mrs. Mumbleton had to unfold, in reply, was, that a cart had carried away their household goods to the London wagon; and that the London coach had conveyed away themselves and children. They had

paid their rent to the last shilling ; given up their house to the landlord, taken leave of no one in that old familiar place, which had been to them crueller and more hard-hearted than a land of strangers. But beyond these facts, which were self-evident, the vicar's lady had nothing to tell ; nor could subsequent inquiry, throughout all Apston, obtain a syllable more. One thing alone was clear to Miss Lavinia : whatever further mischance might happen to her poor relations, she should be denied the pleasure of witnessing. They had escaped her. And like some tyrant, whose victim evades a public execution by dying in prison, she could scarcely refrain from arraigning Providence for having robbed her of her prey.

But the explanations denied to Captain Erskine's obdurate kinswoman, need not be withheld from the reader ; who, if kind enough to have afforded a trifle of sympathy to his woes, deserves to be informed that, about six weeks after the birth of the little boy who had nearly cost so dear to his family, poor Erskine received one day a letter by the London post, nearly as startling

as the former one from the Horse-Guards; with the additional disadvantage, that the present missive, *not* being *On His Majesty's Service*, had to be paid for in hard silver to the postman.

The letter, which was from an old brother officer, ran as follows :—

“ With every disposition, my dear Erskine, to make excuses for the preoccupations of a family man, I must say, I take it rather unkind, (aware as you are of my permanent address in town,) that you have never found an opportunity to give me a syllable of tidings of your welfare. How, in the name of all that is mysterious, was I to find out that you were settled at Apston?—I fancied you had gone out to Prince Edward's Island, where some remnants of your family must, I think, still abide; and addressed letters to you there, which were duly returned to me by the Post-office. For you cannot suppose me to have forgotten the extent of my obligations towards you, or that I was indifferent to the welfare of the man who saved my life in the Peninsula, by a display of gallantry which deserved to have been

exercised in behalf of a more worthy object. Be that as it may, my family, with becoming partiality, do not consider it thrown away, and have long felt towards you an esteem which, I *must* say, you have taken most ungracious pains to deny them the pleasure of expressing.

“However, (laud we the caprices of the blind goddess !) a few months ago I happened to be staying in a country-house with an old fogrum, whose stupidity I thought unpardonable, considering he bore the same name with my Talavera preserver. On cross-questioning Sir John Erskine, I found that he had the honour to be your uncle ; and that you were married, and quietly settled as the father of a family at Apston in Shropshire.

I scarcely knew whether to be glad or to be indignant at finding that you were still alive. I suppose, however, I *must have* been a *little* pleased : for, the first leisure moment I could command, I hastened down to your retreat, hoping to find you surrounded with the domestic happiness and comfort which certainly no man more richly deserves.

“Alas! my dear Erskine, on my arrival at Apston, your poor wife was at the point of death; and while waiting a day or two at the inn, trusting her recovery might justify my presenting myself again at your door, I heard from vulgar report enough of your family affairs, to be satisfied that Fortune had treated you less liberally than would have done her credit. My visit could only be a troublesome intrusion.

“In short, my dear fellow, (for to this conclusion must we come at last,) I have ever since been cudgeling my brains to discover some way in which to better your condition, without compromising those honourable feelings of a gentleman, with which you were always so eminently endowed. My father, I need not tell you, forms part of the great lumbering car of Juggernaut, which we devotees, who allow ourselves to be crushed under its wheels, call Government. The old gentleman has considerable patronage in his own department, and considerable influence in the departments of his colleagues; and I feel, of course, that I am doing him a double favour, by en-

abling him to discharge, in some small degree, the debt of gratitude of his scapegrace son, and to procure for his Majesty's civil service, a servant whom his Majesty's military service so cavalierly dispensed with.

“ And so, my dear Erskine, even let Somerset House atone for the wrongs of the Horse-Guards. The appointment (of which the enclosed letter from my father's secretary more exactly explains the nature) conveys with it a comfortable residence, and a salary of nearly five hundred per annum. By accepting it, you will confer a favour on my whole family. By allowing me to meet the difficulties of your removal from Shropshire by becoming your banker for your first quarter's salary, a further obligation on myself. Do not be at the trouble of writing me a long letter of thanks. We shall meet shortly, when I hope to disclose in person to Mrs. Erskine all the pleasure I heard expressed by humble well-wishers of hers, during my stay at Apston, that her valuable life was spared to her family. In return, if you are disposed to be over-grateful for my poor ser-

vices, I shall *then* be able to silence you with more detailed allusions to the eventful hour when, at the risk of life and limb, your prowess preserved so eminent an individual to his country, creditors, and friends, as

“Your very faithful and obliged

“BALTIMORE.”

“POWDERHAM HOUSE, PICCADILLY,
February 15, 1825.”

PART III.

ONE of the wisest of the ancients asserted, on his release from bondage, that it was worth while to have submitted to the ignominy of fetters, in order to enjoy the delicious itching of the skin produced by their removal. And it is almost equally worth while to have long languished under the pressure of difficulties, to experience the joy of sudden release ; above all, the joy of seeing tears wiped from off the faces dearest to us on earth,—of knowing that *their* miseries are over, that the path before them is one of plenteousness and peace !

Captain Erskine's heart ached again with its consciousness of joy, as he took his final departure from the town, the scene of all his earthly happiness, yet of such poignant anguish ; and the advantages of the unlooked-for benefit conferred upon him were doubled, in his eyes, by the necessity it

conveyed of quitting a spot so replete with painful associations. His latter days at Apston had been days of pain and terror; his nights, of sleeplessness and despair. The almost bare walls of his wretched home had witnessed the toils and tears of his wife; and, on his own part, an agony "too deep for tears," even the apprehension of seeing those loved and lovely ones want bread.

But why revert to all this? It was over! His penance was ended! God had looked upon the fruit of his and Margaret's probation, and seen that it was good!

Already, though the secret had not transpired in Apston, he had been up to town; had seen his friend Lord Baltimore, and effected such arrangements as would enable his family to take possession of their new apartments, immediately on their arrival; a pleasant suite of rooms, overlooking the busy, joyous, life-like Thames, and retaining a sufficient portion of furniture, taken at a valuation of his predecessor. For Lord Baltimore acted towards him as a brother; and experienced genuine satisfaction at see-

ing the little family safely and happily installed in their new abode.

It was only when Erskine adverted to his eagerness to acquaint himself with the duties of his new office, and to be presented to his new patron, that the brow of his friend became a little overclouded.

“No hurry, no hurry,” said he; “you have a fortnight’s leisure before you. My father is laid up at Powderham House with a fit of the gout, (a disorder which every minister, who respects himself, keeps in reserve for emergencies;) and, I am happy to say, your rotation at your board does not commence till next month.”

Now Lord Baltimore was happy to say so; not only because desirous that the new Commissioner should enjoy, unmolested by official cares, and in the bosom of his family, his first few weeks in the metropolis, but in order that he might become a little sophisticated by London air before he encountered the contact of his colleagues; and, more especially, before he was exposed to the keen scrutiny of the Earl of Powderham’s private secretary, Mr. Minchem. He

was anxious that his friend Erskine should order a coat from Stulz, and get into London habits, or rather *out* of the country habit of telling not only the truth, but the *whole* truth, and nothing *but* the truth.

“This excellent fellow will not do at present for official life!” was Lord Baltimore’s secret comment, after listening to the new Commissioner’s avowal of a most conscientious and ardent desire to do his duty in the new state of life into which it had pleased the King to call him. “He will work too hard by half, and speak too soft! I must get Midge to school him a little, before I trust him among the Treasury sharks. But, plague take it, Midge himself is the sharpest of them all! Midge wanted my father to give this Commissionership to Lady Louisa’s brother. Midge will make but a mouthful of him.—I can’t trust him alone with Midge!”

Nevertheless, when the period arrived for Erskine’s inauguration into his duties of office, Lord Baltimore was fain to turn him over to the hands of the private secretary; and poor Erskine, whose reverence for the

gravities of official life was still unabated, could scarcely recover from his surprise at finding in the man he had pictured to himself as a stern, pains-taking, reflectionate man,—a flippant, familiar young gentleman, apparently just emancipated from Eton.

“Baltimore informs me,” said he, in answer to the nervous salutation of Captain Erskine, “that you want me to help you in breaking the ice with the dons of your board? *Allons!*—I suppose we shall find some of them at the shop. Though I know that Somerset, the chairman, seldom finds his way to the scratch till after twelve.”

To reject the services of a master of the ceremonies provided by his excellent friend, Lord Baltimore, was out of the question; but, truth to say, Captain Erskine felt a little ashamed of the boyish sauciness of his guide; more especially when, on following him into the spacious chamber overlooking the river, in which he was for the future to officiate, he saw that the couple of gentlemanly men who rose on their entrance, were advanced in years, and of sufficiently grave deportment.

But the individual, by whom he was formally presented to their attention, was no longer the perfumed, flippant dandy, who had treated *him* only as "Baltimore's" particular friend. In setting foot on an official floor, he became in a moment the sententious solemn prig of a private secretary of the Earl of Powderham; a person to whom the Commissioners bowed with unspeakable deference, though the contemporary of their own grandsons. They talked together about the weather, with mysterious gravity; and of the gout of Lord Powderham, with reverential awe. Towards himself, whom they understood to be a person high in the regard of the Earl, their respect was equally marked. But, by the promptitude with which they threw off their artificial formality the moment the private secretary quitted the room, the new functionary learnt to appreciate the tact shown by Lord Baltimore, in selecting Mr. Midge as the interpreter of his merits.

Nevertheless, when he thanked his kind friend, he was cautioned against relying too much on the candour of the man who had

transacted his business in so off-hand a manner.

“Midge is a sharp and useful fellow ; but don’t trust him too far,” said Baltimore. “Whenever you want anything of my father, apply to *me*. I, at least, shall tell you the truth. But habits of lying are so invaluable to the private secretary of a great man, that it is too much to expect him to get his tongue out by sincerity, in particular instances. I advise you, therefore, to talk and listen to Midge with the greatest reserve.”

After such a recommendation, it was a relief to the single-minded soldier to find he was to have no official intercourse with the private secretary. Meanwhile, his new duties soon came easy to him. Restored in health and spirits, and cheered by the society of men of sense and education, from which he had been so long debarred, his mind gradually recovered its tone, as his frame its elasticity. Relieved from the pressure of domestic care, he was at leisure to become a man again.

A very short experience rendered him a

favourite among his colleagues. With *his* habits of life, work was play, and he was ready to accept double his share. *His* shoulder was always ready for the wheel. *He* wanted no holidays. Early hours, and a constant residence in town, were no punishment to Captain Erskine; and certain of the old brother-officers, who had so compassionated his drudgery at Apston, would perhaps have pitied him almost as much at Somerset House, had they been aware how much of other people's duties he contrived to saddle upon his shoulders.

Nor did he want for cheerful society. The newspaper announcement of his appointment brought around him numbers of his old army acquaintance; while his cousins, the three daughters of Sir John Erskine, (the innocent cause of so much misery to him,) two of whom were now settled in life by brilliant marriages, hastened to make the acquaintance of his wife, whose unpretending, lady-like manners recommended her, at first sight, to their good opinion.

But, of all his associates, Lord Baltimore

was the steadiest and most valued ; scarcely a day passed without their meeting. The happiness of the Erskines was so completely his work, that the young lord experienced, in the sight of their prosperity, a sense of enjoyment it was difficult to deny himself. At the period of his former intimacy with his *protégé*, he was himself a younger brother, nor had his father at that time succeeded to his earldom ; and he had, consequently, undergone wholesome schooling as a subaltern in a marching regiment ; the happy results of which the recency of the death of the late Earl of Powderham, and of his own elder brother, had not yet suffered to evaporate. The most heartfelt recollections of his life were attached to the period when he was the comrade and day-by-day companion of Alexander Erskine ; and it seemed to freshen and revive them, among the artificialities of his new honours, to take his place in the homely household ; and see, in the worship bestowed on his friend by children and wife, indications of warmer feelings than were compatible with the etiquettes of stars and

garters, among which his own destinies were appointed.

For a time, Lord Baltimore seemed to debate whether he should act kindly or wisely by withdrawing his friend from these simple pleasures to dazzle his honest eyes with the brilliancies of Powderham House. But the consideration that Erskine's worldly interests might be materially served by an introduction to a man so high in office as his father, finally prevailed; and, as Erskine had three little boys to be provided for hereafter, and was now sufficiently resubmitted to the conventional usages of life to be exposed to the fastidious scrutiny of even an Adolphus Midge, without fear of being converted into a butt, Lord Baltimore represented to his friend the propriety of making the acquaintance of the Earl, through whose interest he had obtained his appointment.

"I don't promise you that you will find my family circle a pleasant one," said he. "They are stiffish sort of people. I flatter myself you will tell me, some day or other, that you like *me* the best of them. But my father has the power to serve you, and

has already shown the will. So, the sooner you make your bow to him the better."

The bow was soon made; and, as Lord Baltimore exercised in the family the sort of influence usually exercised by an eldest son, (where the estates are entailed,) his friend shortly afterwards received a formal invitation to dinner.

In ministerial houses, there are always three or four well-dressed nondescript hangers-on, who cover each other's insignificance, and are regarded, or rather *disregarded*, by the aristocratic portion of the assembly as part of the paraphernalia of official life. Erskine, with his quiet manners and sober black coat, passed for one of these; and, as such, was at leisure to take note of the new world into which he was thus singularly translated; for he was no longer the quiescent man, whose weariness of mind and body had adapted itself to the tameness of Apston on his arrival at the White House. Since then, his mind had passed through the searching ordeal of adversity. Since then, he had acquired the responsibilities of a husband and father. He was

not now content to take with equal thanks the buffets and rewards of Fortune, or to doff the world aside, and bid it pass. On the contrary, he was desirous to examine it with deliberation, as the world in which not only his own destinies were to be achieved, but those of his successors.

Though somewhat bewildered by the stirring chances which had snatched him up like a whirlwind, to let him fall, like the cadi in the Arabian tale, into the king's chamber, he stood aloof—"among them, but not of them"—in the circle he found assembled at Powderham House.

For there were courtiers upon the earth in those days. George IV. was on the throne of England, Louis XVIII. on that of France; and a variety of lords, arrayed in a variety of ribands, figured at the feet of both. Courtiers like golden pippins, have now become extinct. Cabinet ministers, and lords of the bedchamber there must be to the end of time. But there is no longer such a thing besetting Windsor Castle or the Tuileries, as a man, or set of men, content to shuffle off their habits, tastes, and

opinions, and shuffle on the cast-off ones of the sovereign.

Yet, aforesaid, no dishonour was attached to either the name or vocation. A poet wrote boldly in his tragedy, "Enter the king and his courtiers;" and proud was the noble lord who could talk of his ancestor being one of the "courtiers" of Henri IV. or Charles II. But the epoch of reform smoked out the insects into which the great vassals of the crown had degenerated; and the Powderham tribe will be commemorated in history as the last of the species.

The devoted courtier of a king is pretty sure to delight in toadyism. The Earl of Powderham was consequently surrounded with parasites; and Lord Baltimore the only person in the habit of accosting him with downright truth.—Erskine was amazed to perceive, in the course of his first dinner-party, that all he had esteemed so petty and provincial in the subservience of the Apston coterie to his cousin Lavinia, was emulated, on a more exalted scale, among the greatest in the land.

Just as the courtiers of the king drank

sherry and bathed at Brighton, because the constitution of his Majesty was benefited by Spanish wine and sea-air, the most obedient humble servants of Powderham House affected an enthusiasm for Dutch pictures, because the Earl preferred Cuyp to Claude, and Teniers to Guido; and would listen to no music but Arne, Callcott, and Shield, because his lordship's ear was unattunable to the statelier harmonies of the Italian school. Certain of the nondescripts in black occasionally advanced, with becoming deprecation, a slightly different opinion; such as, that "the English operas of Storace and Kelly (which were known to be pirated from the Italian) were sometimes not so bad," or, for want of argument, the conversation might have flagged; and startling was it to the sober sense of Erskine to perceive the outburst of exaggerated horror with which these differences of opinion were received by the courtiers, male and female, — loud, like drums, in proportion to their hollowness.

The ladies, more especially, were so fully of "dear Lord Powderham's" way of thinking,

as to be “horried at the want of patriotism of the person who could prefer Mozart or Rossini to ‘native talent;’” while Erskine, who had not supposed such warm partizanship to exist, except in matters of politics, little suspected that the spasmodic vehemence of the disputants was assumed, to fill up the languid vacuity of their discourse; —as

Geographers on pathless downs
Place elephants for want of towns.

To *his* ears the superlatives garnishing the exclamations of the Powderham clique were merely expressions of misplaced enthusiasm!

The time was not yet come for his eye to detect the difference between rouge and a natural bloom, — between Roman pearls and those of Ormus. At present, all he heard and saw was real; and to one who has buffeted hand to hand with the necessities of life, such wondrous importance attached to its mere garnish, sounds like mockery.

Often in his humbler retreat, had he allowed himself to cogitate upon affairs of

state with the freedom of an honest-hearted man unshackled by party connexions, and the perspicuity of a clear-headed man unpuzzled by over-education; and it had frequently amazed him how such very glaring abuses were suffered to subsist, or heaps of rubbish to encumber the ways of public life, which a single stroke of the broom might clear away. But he was no longer surprised, now that he heard the conscript fathers expending what he had a right to suppose the energies of their eloquence, in fighting the battles of the Ancient music and its directors.

A violent argument which he one night happened to overhear between two bald-headed dukes high in the councils of their sovereign, and which *unheard*, his innocence had attributed to the then political touchstone of the Catholic Question, proved to refer to the expected arrival in London of Rossini, and the necessity of offering him some public distinction. The battles of Haydn and Mozart were frequently fought o'er again at Powderham House; and having been eagerly seized upon by the rival fac-

tions on entering the field of battle, Captain Erskine found himself addressed, *not* with

Under what *king*, Bezonian ?—speak or die !

but under what fiddler !—

The arguments of so select an assembly were, of course, “though deep, not loud ;” and the prattle as small in emission, as it was prodigious in nothingness. The great guns were muffled, and the warriors, like Lear’s, shod with felt.—But what a waste of time, thought, and care, in the sham fights of that mimic war, on the part of those whose time, thought, and care, were pledged to their country !—

When Erskine returned home, he drew a deep breath after crossing his own threshold, as if relieved to find himself once more on *terra firma*. He felt as though he had been dancing on a tight-rope of silk, over an abyss of which the raging billows were made of painted cotton, like those of a stage decoration. It was a comfort to be asked, in a genuine voice, the simple question of, “Well, have you spent a pleasant evening ?” and know that the words *really* purported,—Has your evening been pleasant ?

Margaret had never looked so attractive in his eyes, as now that they were wearied with the fripperies of fashion, and his ears harassed with the jargon of affectation ; and he put his hand into hers with a feeling of trust and tenderness, consolatory enough to one who, ever since the children were in bed, had been trying in vain to busy herself sufficiently with a book, or needlework, to forget that her husband was enjoying the pleasures of a sphere to which he naturally belonged, and from which she had withdrawn him into her own.

For on looking into his face, she saw that he might have been spending a *pleasant* evening, but that he was conscious of having lost a *happy* one!—

“ We cannot expect a whole family of Baltimores !” said he, in answer to her interrogations. “ Lord Powderham is apparently a cold, selfish, old man, who renders his estimation of his consequence apparent by his efforts to set one at ease ; and the Countess a woman of fifty, who dresses as much as any two women of five-and-twenty. Their daughters are pretty, affected,

girls, who talk about ‘doats of bonnets’ and ‘loves of songs ;’ and though two or three men were of the party, whose speeches in the House prove them to possess distinguished talents, I conclude they reserve them *for* the House ; for never was there anything more pointless than their small-talk !”

“ In short, you were not amused ? ”

“ On the contrary, I was *greatly* amused. But I had expected to be edified. I wanted to respect Lord Powderham. I wished to find Baltimore surrounded by a family deserving of him ! ”

On the other hand, the impression made by Captain Erskine was more favourable than the impression he had received. In ministerial circles, every member is as much the representative of a certain interest, as every member of the House of Commons. Erskine represented, at Powderham House, the personal partiality of a son and heir, who had cut off the entail of the Powderham estates to a sufficient extent to pay the debts of his father, and assign portions to his sisters ; and such a member had pro-

digious claims on the courtesies of the clique.

But Lord Baltimore passed in his family for an "odd fellow." In addition to the usual maternal sorrows with which the Countess bewailed the loss of her eldest son, (who was everything the fondest mother could wish for in an eldest son,—at eighteen a member of White's,—and at fifteen the pet *valseur* of Almack's,—to say nothing of Newmarket, and other distinctions, which had left a heap of debts upon the shoulders of his noble family,—) she often lamented that her dear Baltimore of to-day "had not been educated with a view to his present distinctions. During his uncle's lifetime, in spite of all her representations, he had been allowed to work out his promotion in the line. She was afraid he would never get over that marching regiment!—He was always entangling himself with odd people. He was not *au niveau* of his position!"

When, therefore, Captain Erskine was announced to her, as recommended by her son to his father for an appointment, as the gallant preserver of his life in Spain, the

Countess felt convinced that some unrepresentable savage, some horrid half-pay captain, was to be the object of her civilities.

Such as he might prove, he must, of course, be borne with ; for “ Baltimore had strong claims on their forbearance.” Even had the lady-mother been aware that what Lord Baltimore, cognisant of the foibles of his family, described as “ rural retirement in Shropshire,” was in fact starvation at Apston, she would have felt bound to welcome the new junior Commissioner with as much suavity as was compatible with a very stiff Parisian corset, and a very *génant* Parisian toque.

It was a great relief, therefore, to find in Captain Erskine, a diffident well-bred man, by no means disposed to trespass on their good intentions. There was a reserve in his manner, and paleness on his cheek, which, to the young ladies of those Byronized times, savoured of romance. Like most of the sons of respectable colonial families, he had been sent to England for education at an early age, and spent his five years at Harrow, learning the nothing which boys are

sent to public schools expressly to learn ; and at sixteen, an ensigncy in the army put the finishing stroke to the ignorance thus auspiciously begun. He had consequently passed the last thirty years in acquiring that more valuable portion of human knowledge which is learned without the intervention of books. Fifteen years on active service, and ten in domestic seclusion, left him competent to discharge the ordinary duties of a citizen ; and judge, with tolerable discernment, the capacity of those intrusted with the higher offices of the state.

But it was no indication of wit or wisdom that rendered him acceptable to the fine people at Powderham House : it was his reality ! A certain distinctness from themselves, pointed him out to them as a piece of genuine nature. They believed in his word,—they confided in the changes of his countenance. — When *he* expressed admiration, they were flattered. It was like receiving a single good sixpence with a handful of flash notes !

Such persons as Adolphus Midge were a little put out by the veracity of the new

BLANKS AND PRIZES ; OR,

comer, and scarcely knew how to parry with a foil the touch of a true Toledo. But even the private Secretary, a man of expedients and aware that he must learn to accommodate himself to the peculiarities of one so high in the estimation of his patron's family, soon adopted a mode of dealing with him ; or rather submitted to treat him with the indulgence shown to a raw-recruit, before he has learned to handle his musket.

The indulgence would have been a little more contemptuous, perhaps, had not the shrewd Secretary stood considerably in awe of " Baltimore !"

PART IV.

THE kinsfolk of modern times somewhat resemble crocuses, which expand like globes of gold in the sunshine, but shut up their hearts again as soon as the skies are overcast.

It was surprising how warmly old Sir John Erskine expressed his satisfaction in the prosperity of a nephew, who, so long as he remained at Apston, might as well have been buried in St. Peter's churchyard, as in his humble home, for any inquiry that his uncle had been at the trouble of making!

It is true he was justified in inferring that, since settled in the native place of his mother's wealthy family, his nephew must be well provided for. He knew, indeed, that his brother had derived no fortune from the same source; and that, when the Erskine family and loyalist cause were ruined together, by the issue of the American war, a small

colonial appointment afforded as meagre a compensation to his brother Alexander, as his baronetcy to himself. But the secretary of the British American province had managed to give his only son a good education, and procure him a commission ; which, as Sir John often remarked, was provision enough for a young man of spirit.

Now, however, that the young man of spirit had progressed into a middle-aged man of good prospects, it was only natural he should take a warmer interest in his welfare. Not that he intended Captain Erskine should ever profit by his heirship presumptive to his title. Sir John, who was enjoying a green old age, had determined that the second baronet of his line should be a son of his own by a second marriage ; and if this heir-chimerical were slow in making its appearance, it was only because, at the various watering-places where the old gentleman was in the habit of looking out for a wife, he was apt to ambition things above him, and fancy himself entitled to birth and fortune, as well as youth and beauty. He asked, in

short, far too long a price for his Lady Erskineship; and it consequently hung on hand.

The matrimonial campaigns at Brighton and Leamington, however, which had failed to cut short the prospects of little Algon Erskine, had at least married off Sir John's two elder daughters, the one to an Irish peer, the other to a Yorkshire squire; excellent matches, to which the personal merits of Jane and Sophia Erskine did credit; and Lady Carrolstown and Mrs. Wakehurst having houses in town, and being always ready to chaperon their unmarried sister Georgiana, Sir John had more leisure than ever on his hands to look out for heiresses, and repair his dilapidated personal charms for their captivation. The sight of his nephew's three fine boys, notwithstanding the grand-unclely cordiality with which he welcomed the family to town, seemed only to stimulate a desire for the creation of a nursery of his own.

The question of heirship was, however, of course, a forbidden one in both their houses. Among Mrs. Erskine's limited ac-

quaintance in London, Georgiana Erskine was the most deservedly cherished, as a lively, warm-hearted creature, who met her country-cousins half-way, and treated her "cousin Alick" with the frankness of a sister. Margaret, who had never quite overcome her feelings of deference towards the husband so much her superior in age and qualifications, was sometimes amazed at the coolness with which Miss Erskine rallied him on his foibles, and gave him, in matters of taste, the law which is usually taken by a wife.

But how could he do otherwise than submit good-humouredly to Georgiana's raillery, in consideration of the generous warmth with which he adopted her humble cousins. Amid the gay diversions of the London season, she was full of attentions to Margaret ; and notwithstanding the distance between Curzon Street and Somerset House, and the age and infirmities of the old baronet's coach-horses, Miss Erskine took care that her airings should be shared by the wife and children of cousin Alick, whenever they found it agreeable. Georgiana was a little sur-

prised at the complaisance with which her father (who, though he thought his first wife might be replaced by a second marriage, regarded his old coachman and horses as irreplaceable) submitted to these expeditions. But Sir John seemed proud to be of service to his nephew.

“You will make Jane and Sophia jealous, my dear, if you devote so much time to little Mrs. Erskine,” was all he said in remonstrance.

“Sophia and Jane have carriages and horses of their own,” replied she; “while Mrs. Erskine has nothing to relieve the monotony of her life. My cousin Alick is *always* at his office.”

“My nephew is certainly a most zealous public servant,” said Sir John, carefully examining in the glass the results of his morning’s Circassian dyeing. “My nephew, I am proud to believe, is a *very* rising man!”

“An excellent husband and father, if he don’t get spoiled in London,” was Miss Erskine’s rejoinder. “It is a satisfaction to see *one* man in the world, to whom his family is a first object, and an object in the right

way. The little Erskines are real children, and allowed to enjoy children's happiness. After seeing my poor little nephews and nieces dressed out like puppets or dancing dogs for the gratification of parental vanity, it comforts my eyes to look at Margaret Erskine's progeny in plain clothes, which admit of climbing and sprawling, riding and running; little healthy, happy, honest creatures, who promise to grow up into worthy men and women."

"Provided the simplicity of their habits, and roughness of their rearing, be not carried *too* far," said Sir John, in a modifying tone, settling the plaits of his cravat. "My nephew, you must remember, Georgiana, is a rising man, and his family may hereafter move in the same circles with the offspring of Wakehurst and Lord Carrolstown."

"I do not suppose they would move in them with more credit for having worn panaches of feathers, or cockades of every colour of the rainbow, like the poor little Carrols, who undergo half-an-hour's toilet before they can be taken into Grosvenor Square for their morning's walk!—However,

dear papa, I am glad to find you do not disapprove of my showing attention to this amiable, unassuming new cousin."

"On the contrary, my dear," interrupted Sir John, who was preparing, hat in hand, for his daily saunter to his club, "I think you cannot do better than cultivate Mrs. Erskine's acquaintance: for, as I said before, my dear Georgy, I consider my nephew a very rising man; and between ourselves—"

He paused. A glimpse of his daughter's ingenuous face, which he happened to obtain in the glass as he was trying to get a parting view of his own, suggested a doubt whether she were altogether to be trusted with the confidential observation he was about to make. With a muttered request, therefore, that her drive with Mrs. Erskine might not render her too late for dinner, the old gentleman quitted the room; and had her cousin Alick been still a bachelor, there might have been reason to conclude that the Nova Scotia baronet meditated matrimonial projects in his favour, accordant with those conceived by the gorgon of the White House.

Meanwhile, such is the unsatisfiability of the human heart, that neither the comforts nor the pleasures she enjoyed contented the feelings of Margaret. Though gratified by the unexpected notice of her husband's family, and grateful to Heaven for a degree of prosperity beyond the utmost ambition of her dreams, Margaret felt rather depressed than elevated by the position she had attained.

For she was no longer all in all to her husband. Every day she enjoyed less and less of his society. His spirits were rising with his fortunes. He was looking ten years younger than at the moment of his marriage ; twenty years younger than when he quitted Apston for town. His countenance and complexion were bright with happiness ; joy rang in his very voice ; and instead of the almost womanly carefulness with which he had been wont to tend his children, he now loved to incite them to a game of romps,—to fling them to the ceiling in sportive affection,—to make them rude and noisy, and show off their boisterous merriment to other people. Margaret's ear some-

times thirsted after those subdued tones of old, in which he used to whisper endearments to those little creatures, almost as much the objects of solicitude as love. They were not pastimes to him *then*. They were, at once, the care and solace of his anxious life.

Still, Margaret had sense to know that she was tempting Providence by these repinings. To be angry with her husband for enjoying the blessings showered upon him, was, indeed, a weakness ; and though it was, perhaps, to be desired, considering the uncertain tenure of human happiness, that he should “rejoice with trembling,”—that he should not so thoroughly forget his days of sackcloth and ashes,—and that, instead of accepting so many invitations to Powderham House, he should reflect upon the necessity of turning his present position to account for the future benefit of his children,—Mrs. Erskine had no excuse for fancying, as she often did, that, had he married a wife of his own condition of life, he would have been content to spend his evenings at home.

While the husband felt like a slave

released from bondage in his emancipation from Apston and the scorns of the White House, and beheld the bounds of the narrow horizon of his former existence expand till he had scarcely eyes enough to feast upon its extended limits, the wife entertained an opinion that he was now, for the first time, transformed into a bondslave. His new horizon included only this world in its views, while of old, its prospects extended to the heaven of heavens !—For the gewgaws of worldliness had created a false standard of comparison in his mind. The pageantry of fashion, with its delusive glare, was converting him into an idolator of puppets. The dust under his feet seemed precious as gold-dust ; the atmosphere, formed of a more fragrant ether. A favoured guest at the Barmecide's feast of fashionable life, he was the dupe of a world of mockeries.

Like all stay-at-home wives, however, Margaret exaggerated to herself the delinquencies of her husband. Half the truancy of poor Erskine arose from the importunities of Lord Baltimore ;—who, finding no kindred spirit in his own family, could

not deny himself the enjoyment of his old brother-officer's company, whenever it was attainable. Fancying himself in Mrs. Erskine's way, he would bribe her husband from home with opera tickets, or private boxes at the play, or concerts at Powderham House; recalling to the mind of his friend the time when even the twang of a guitar had charms for him, and the smart of his wounds was forgotten in the warble of a segudadilla.

Powderham House, meanwhile, shrugged its shoulders at the growing intimacy. "Just like one of Baltimore's strange fancies! Baltimore could never be persuaded to cultivate an acquaintance that did him honour in the eyes of the world. However, he might have formed a more dangerous connexion. Captain Erskine's wife was a country dowdy, and their daughter only seven years old!"—

The Earl and Countess consequently continued to welcome the man in whose company the plain-dealing, plain-spoken Baltimore took delight; till, as creatures of habit, they began to take delight in it also. As the person, to secure a provision for whom their

son had consented to a measure his parents otherwise despaired of achieving, Lord Powderham regarded Captain Erskine as the passive instrument by which the debts of the Baltimore family had been paid, and its daughters portioned.

Now, in those days when, as we have said before, there were courtiers on the earth, there was no want of the perquisites, sinecures, and pensions, which constitute the natural nourishment of courtiership. George IV. was a liberal pay-master. He loved to see his dependants as well-dressed as his well-dressed self: he loved to know that they fared sumptuously every day. That certain of the people (or, as they were then considered, *the populace*,) went bare in consequence, would have vexed him, had it occurred to his good-natured feelings. But it was not *his* business to suggest the suppression of offices which his royal ancestors had judged indispensable to the public weal. It was the province of his ministers, who were paid for such duties: or, if they proved oblivious, it was the province of parliament to jog their memory. If parliament itself

neglected its duty, it was the fault of the people for choosing such a parliament, or rather for not enforcing and legalizing its right to choose a better.

And thus, (the people, who bear so many burdens being well able to support the weight of an additional imputation,) let us set it down as the fault of his Majesty's faithful populace, that Lord Powderham was one day enabled, out of the love and affection he bore to Captain Alexander Erskine, the friend of his son, and guest of his table, to offer him a sinecure of nearly six hundred pounds per annum! Where situated,—how named,—no matter!—It was one of the golden fringes or tassels attached, at that period, to the chair of state, per favour of Council-office, or Pipe-office, or Hanaper, or some other of the gorgeous inexplicabilities, the only certain whereabouts of which was in the Red Book.

The motive of this piece of ministerial munificence is more easily described.

“Why did not your friend Erskine dine here to-day?” Lord Powderham inquired one night of his son.

“I did not think of inviting him.”

“I am sure I wish you *had*. Did you notice how detestably Midge played that last rubber? Lord Broadhaugh (though he pocketed eight guineas by his blunder) could scarcely keep his countenance. Now, Erskine plays admirably! I don’t know when I have seen a cooler or better player than Erskine.”

“He was always considered, in the regiment, a capital player; and has probably had some practice since. But though he consented to hold my cards for me the other night, while I slipped away to the play, I should be sorry to see him play here often.—He can’t afford it.—Erskine is a family-man of small means.”

“But his commissionership is worth five or six hundred a-year?”

“Something under five;—and he has six children!”—

Lord Powderham looked aghast. The notion of such penury set his teeth on edge.

“*Poor fellow!*” said he,—thinking at once of Captain Erskine’s young family, and of

his over-trumped king of diamonds. And though he did not audibly add, "We must see what can be done for him!" the sentence was inscribed among the wrinkles of his ministerial forehead.

About a month afterwards, — a month during which Adolphus Midge perpetually irritated Lord Powderham's nerves by the loss of the odd trick, (seeing that the private secretary wished to give himself the air of being desperately in love with a pretty duchess, higher in favour at court than his patron, the Earl of Powderham,) about a month afterwards, one of the magic whispers which premonish the ear of government whenever a piece of patronage is about to fall into its hands, acquainted Lord Powderham that he should soon have a sinecure at his disposal.

The aged nephew of some duke of the seventeenth century, who had never been more in his born days than nephew to a duke—and a sinecurist,—was about to drop, in the fulness of years and insignificance, into the family vault; and the office, bestowed upon his lordship fifty years before,

to secure him a couple of hacks and seat at the Opera for life, to the disposal of the administration.

As there happened to be no urgent name, just then, upon the royal list of noble paupers submitted to his consideration, the Earl felt at liberty to bestow this opportune windfall on the excellent whist-player; and to gratify the excellent son who had facilitated, by a fall of timber, the rise of the family credit, he requested Baltimore to apprise his friend of the good fortune awaiting him. Again, therefore, with the greatest delicacy, Lord Baltimore entreated his preserver to add to the family obligations, by accepting what hundreds of ennobled grasp-alls were already soliciting.

The amazement and gratitude of the family-man, who was already beginning to find even the economized expenses of London make large inroads upon his salary, knew no bounds. Six hundred a-year for doing nothing, to one who, five years before, had vainly implored of the Horse-Guards to be placed on active service, in order to work for his full pay!—He was *then* assured,

that in the present reduced state of the army, it required immense interest to be enabled to do duty for the country ; and now, he was offered a consideration five times as large, for four annual signatures of his name !—For Lord Baltimore, of course, said nothing of the gratuitous services that might be required of him, in dealing with the allied sovereigns of the painted pack.

As a conscientious man, Erskine of course demurred a little concerning the justifiability of such an application of the public money ; but, as his friend forcibly suggested, *his* refusal of the sinecure would not cause its suppression. The place would be otherwise bestowed ; probably on some luxurious fellow, buoyed up on the stream of fashion by the bladders of half-a-dozen *other* sinecures.

The next annual volume of the Red Book, consequently, bore inscribed upon its pages the name of Captain Alexander Erskine, twice repeated ; and the next whist-party at Powderham House, beheld him battling for the odd trick with all the amiable placidity.

characterizing such battles, where the company is high and the stakes are proportionate.

And now, the secret ingratitude of Margaret towards the good angel of the family, grew blacker than ever.—For she could not expect her husband to refuse the invitations of so kind a patron ; and there was something cheerless indeed in the evenings he spent among these people ;—evenings beginning at ten at night, and ending towards three in the morning !—

To one who felt that there was “na luck about the house, wi’ her gudeman awa’,” and who could neither sleep nor read for the unnatural loneliness of her chamber, the claims of Powderham House and its whist, constituted a real evil. Often would she creep to the nursery for consolation, and contemplate her treasures as they lay asleep, at the risk of waking them, and affronting the nurse—the privileged tyrant of the spot. Or when insupportably nervous and anxious, steal one of the little creatures from its nest, and hush it to sleep again in her own ; knowing how impossible it is

for a mother to shed *very* bitter tears, with her little one nestling in her bosom.

Yet when the truant returned, apologizing for disturbing her at such an hour by assurances that he could not quit the party before, with the certainty of prematurely breaking it up by his departure, Margaret was careful not to tell him she had not been asleep. She knew it would annoy him to know that she had been watching through those lonely hours; for Erskine had a pass-key to his apartments, and she had no pretext for wakefulness.

But the time was approaching for Margaret to revenge upon Powderham House the uneasiness it produced in her little *ménage*.

Late in the summer, about the time when, the great world having broken up for yachting at Cowes and betting at Goodwood, London finds itself partially deserted, Lord Powderham, who had been spending a few days with the King at the royal cottage, was unexpectedly summoned to town one day on Treasury business, and found his evening on his hands. Lord Bal-

timore and the greater number of the *habitués* of the house were at Goodwood ; and the Countess expressed some uncertainty about being able to make up his rubber.

“Send and ask Erskine to dinner,” replied her lord. “Erskine is sure to be at his post.—Erskine never leaves town.”

“It is rather late to send a *formal* invitation,” observed Lady Powderham, looking at her watch. “Let Mr. Midge call and invite him in your name. Midge told me just now he was going to Downing Street.”

Lord Powderham did not think it necessary to rectify an error into which her ladyship often found it convenient to fall, that all public offices are contiguous ; and that Downing Street, Somerset House, Palace Yard, Admiralty, Horse-Guards, might at any moment be sheltered under the same umbrella. On the contrary, he allowed that nothing could be easier than for his secretary to carry the verbal message, and bring back the verbal answer. The result was, that Lady Powderham had to look elsewhere for a substitute for dumbmy,—Cap-

tain Erskine being at Goodwood. Having been invited by his patron to accept the vacant place at dinner, Adolphus Midge seized the opportunity of the ladies quitting the room after dinner, to become communicative.

“’Pon honour,” said he, addressing an old *bon vivant*, Lord Broadhaugh, who was a fixture in the house, in the sort of audible whisper that intends to be overheard,—“’pon honour, Lord Baltimore is a sly dog! —With all his pragmatistical notions of propriety, no man knows better how to manage his affairs under the rose.”

“What is that you are saying, Mr. Midge, about my son and a rose?” inquired Lord Powderham, who was a little hard of hearing, and *very* of comprehension.

“Oh! nothing, my lord, nothing! I can assure your lordship that it was nothing worth repeating.”

“Don’t believe him, Powderham!” cried Lord Broadhaugh, who had no ministerial motives for keeping the private secretary at a distance. “He has got some capital story about Balty, which he is dying to tell.

Come, speak up, Dodo !—Under what rose was Balty lurking this morning ?”

“Your lordship is as well aware as myself that he is at Goodwood races,” replied the Secretary, not quite certain what scandal he might venture before the Earl.

“He and Erskine went down together,” observed Lord John Greatoux, a young man, who for the sake of the bright eyes of Lady Mary Baltimore, occasionally sacrificed himself to the family dinners and whist of Powderham House.

“Exactly. You have hit it !” replied Midge, with an ironical smile. “They went down together, and will come up together, and are *always* together ;—a thing I have sometimes found it difficult to account for by a Minerva-press pretext of a forlorn hope at Talavera, or some such Ann of Swansea incident of romance !”—

“Captain Erskine unquestionably preserved the life of my son, sir, on the occasion to which you allude !” said the Earl, stiffly : for he liked neither the growing flippancy of his secretary, nor the defamation of so fine a whist-player as Erskine.

“Then I have only to beg Lord Baltimore’s and Mrs. Erskine’s pardon, my lord,” cried Midge, with a profound bow of conviction.

“*Mrs. Erskine?*” repeated the Earl, again fancying his ears had played him false.

“Mrs. Erskine’s and Lord Baltimore’s?”

“There is a *Mrs. Erskine*, then in the case?” exclaimed Lord Broadhaugh, hastily finishing his glass of claret. “One might have guessed as much. Balty takes as much care of Erskine as if he had an annuity on his life!—I never *could* make out what Balty saw in him, to throw away so much time in his company!”

“The day seldom passes that Balty does not find his way to Somerset House,” observed Lord John. “Lady Powderham was regretting to me, the other day, that he should be infatuated by a set of people who estrange him from society.”

“And so, Erskine’s wife is a pretty woman, Midge?” inquired Lord Powderham, whose curiosity was now excited. “I remember your telling me (when I wanted particulars about Captain Erskine, previous to inviting

him to my house) that his wife was a mere dowdy !”

“ On her arrival in town, my lord, I confess she struck me in that light,” replied the Secretary. “ She was then the sort of domestic-cookery, huckaback-hemming, country housewife, whom one never thinks it worth while to scrutinize, as regards features or complexion. And your lordship, I remember, was very well pleased to hear she *was* that kind of person—below par, I mean, and unpresentable. You observed that, under such circumstances, there could be no difficulty about giving Lord Baltimore’s friend the run of the house ; but that it would not, of course, have suited Lady Powderham to have a *Mrs.* Erskine intruded on her acquaintance.”

“ Ay ! ay ! I see how it is,” interrupted Lord Broadhaugh. “ Balty is a sly fox, and has been imposing upon us all this time, with his airs of gratitude ! — The Commissioner’s lady is the real attraction, eh ?”

“ One of the most interesting women I ever saw in my life !” replied the Secretary.

“Lovely countenance,—charming manners,—diffident,—gentle—”

“But not a mere school-girl, I hope? I can’t stand your angels in slavering bibs!” cried Lord Broadhaugh.

“Mrs. Erskine is the *mother* of half-a-dozen angels in slavering bibs,” replied Minchem, shrugging his shoulders; “a beautiful woman of about eight-and-twenty.”

“All this is worth inquiring about, Powderham,” cried Lord Broadhaugh, “or you will be having Balty entered for a deeper stake than may suit your book. Don’t you recollect what a passion he was in when I and Midge wanted you to give the place he was begging for Erskine, to Lady Louisa’s brother (who is now, poor fellow, in the King’s Bench.) Had I guessed there was a pretty Mrs. Erskine in the case, I should have known better than to interfere with his projects.”

“Did Mrs. Erskine mention Baltimore’s name?” inquired the Earl of his secretary, more gravely.

“When expressing her regret that her husband would be unable to avail himself

of your lordship's and Lady Powderham's invitation, she mentioned that he had accompanied Lord Baltimore and Sir John Hall to Goodwood."

"I can only say, that if there be a Sir John anybody of the party," cried Lord Broadhaugh, "Balty would have done better to turn the Commissioner over to his hands, and remain in town. In *my* time, the young fellow would have recollected at the first turnpike, urgent business in London."

"Lord Baltimore has, luckily, no occasion to run any hazard of the kind," observed Midge, with a significant smile. "Erskine is the best office man going. I have heard nothing but praises of his assiduity and zeal for the last twelve months. Erskine is always at his post."

"And Balty at *his*, eh?"—cried Lord Broadhaugh, with a laugh.

"My son makes no secret of his daily visits, to the Erskines," observed Lord Powderham, gravely; "and I cannot believe that, with *his* principles, if there *were* any mischief in the matter, he would parade it before his mother and sisters."

“Nor I!” added Lord John Greatoux, with spirit. “After all, Midge has grounded his romance on the slight foundation of a few visits to an old brother-officer, whose wife happens to be a good-looking woman.”

“Wait till you have seen Mrs. Erskine, my dear Lord John,” cried the Secretary; “or rather beware *how* you see her: for she would assuredly turn *your* head, as I own she has done mine. I must have been blind when I called upon her two years ago; or somebody has taught her to dress (or *undress*) according to the more becoming fashion of the day; for she is no longer the same creature.—She is exquisite—positively exquisite!”

The persons to whom Adolphus Midge addressed himself were too much accustomed to verbal exaggeration, to assign much importance to his enthusiasm; Lord Powderham contenting himself with observing—“The most interesting point of the affair is, that as Erskine is at Goodwood with my son, we must do without him to-night at the whist-table.”

He took an early opportunity, however, to

communicate all he had heard to the Countess, who rather confirmed than solaced his anxieties.

“I remember once offering Baltimore to leave a card on Mrs. Erskine,” said she ; “but he begged me *not*, saying she was not accustomed to our habits of life ; that she was simply a good *mère de famille*, and had no wish to move in the world.—I now see the bent of his policy.”

“The thing that displeases me most in the business, is his attempting to throw dust in my eyes !” was the rejoinder of the Earl. “Why not speak out to me at once, as one man of the world to another?—His reserve makes me fear the worst. It may be an attachment, instead of a *liaison*. *Your* practised eye would readily detect the real state of the case. Call upon Mrs. Erskine, therefore, my dear Lady Powderham, without apprising Baltimore, or giving him time to warn her. Let us, at least, make ourselves acquainted with *le dessous des cartes*.”

Such was the origin of a visit which somewhat surprised poor Margaret the following day. While expecting the return of

her husband from the races, the mother and sister of Lord Baltimore were suddenly announced; and the bloom that rose to her cheek, adding to the excited expression of countenance produced by the expectation of Erskine's return after three days' absence, justified their opinion, that they had seldom seen a more attractive woman.

Her children, who were playing in the room, were, like herself, attired in their best to greet their father; and such an air of domestic happiness and decency pervaded the establishment, as carried conviction to the mind of Lady Powderham, that her son's infatuation in favour of the family was only an additional proof of the humdrum nature of his tastes.

“A pretty pleasing woman, but wholly wrapped up in her husband and children,” was her satisfactory announcement to the Earl. “Nothing the least alarming, I assure you!—But you may judge for yourself:—for I have engaged Mrs. Erskine to dine here with her husband, on Monday next.”

Such an invitation had been indeed accepted by Margaret, in the embarrassment

of not knowing how to decline the offered civility of the great lady, by whose sudden visit she was as much flurried as was compatible with the serenity of her nature: not from any contemptible motive—not because she was a countess;—but because Margaret's heart beat quick at welcoming the mother of her husband's friend,—the wife of his patron,—the cause of her recent lonely hours.—

But no sooner had her guests departed,—than she began to regret her acquiescence. Often, while counting the minutes of Erskine's absence, and surmising the attractions he might find in a circle to which her imagination assigned a thousand indefinable graces, she had asked herself whether she was not happier in her old home, sitting up to mend her children's clothes while her husband read to her from some newspaper a week old, or an odd volume of 'The Spectator,' than *now* in her fulness of prosperity: and in those moments of discontent, fancied that all she desired on earth was to be admitted to share his pleasures.

“God forbid,” she would murmur, “that

I should debar him from the amusements befitting his condition in life. All I wish is, the gratification of *seeing* him appreciated as he deserves.—If I could only *only* spend a single evening with him at Powderham House !”

So little, however, was Margaret accustomed to think of herself, as to overlook the fact that she could not be an unseen spectatress,—that she must bear her part in the pageant. But this contingency now rushed into her mind ; and in the consciousness of her disabilities for such a circle, gladly would she have renounced the long-coveted happiness so unexpectedly conceded.

Never in her life had she appeared at what is called “ a party.” She had dined with the various branches of her husband’s family, but, at her own desire, it was *en famille* : and the recollection of the brilliant attire assumed by Lady Carrolstown and Mrs. Wakehurst for even so humble an occasion, filled her with terrible conjectures of the magnificence indispensable for the circle at Powderham House. For Margaret’s inexperience could not be expected

to surmise that the highest portion of London society is far simpler in its tastes, than those who have distinction to attain by outward show. Had she known exactly how to set about the letter, she would certainly have written an excuse to Lady Powderham.

On Erskine's arrival, however, cheerful from the influence of his pleasant expedition,—still more cheerful from the influence of his happy return,—she began to see things in a different light. Her husband was gratified by the attention she had received. Lady Powderham's circle was the one with which he was most familiar; and, with his present income, he felt there was no pretext for the seclusion of his wife. In *his* eyes, she was an ornament to any society: and entertaining secret suspicions that Mr. Wakehurst and Lord Carrolstown, though far from uncourteous, received him and his family at their house in the character of poor relations, he rejoiced to know that they would shortly hear of Mrs. Erskine as an honoured guest at Powderham House.

The person most pleased, however, at the

attention shown to Margaret, was his youngest cousin. Georgiana was not sufficiently blinded by family partiality to be unaware that, though her cousin Alick might be an excellent fellow, his wife, whatever her origin, was by nature far more highly gifted; and with the appreciation usually conceded at *her* age to worldly distinctions, thought it hard that, in the Erskine *ménage*, all the pleasures of life should be for the man, all the drudgery for the woman. In *her* opinion, Margaret was not only better qualified than her husband to withstand the perils of the great world, but to adorn its society.

On the day of the dinner, Miss Erskine took care to secure her father's carriage to the use of her cousins, by pretending to require it for herself: the purport of her visit to Somerset House at seven in the evening, being to offer to Margaret's use the trinkets and ornaments she fancied might be wanting to complete her dress. But no sooner had Georgiana glanced at the graceful figure of Mrs. Erskine, arrayed in a well-made muslin dress, with her rich and beautiful hair arranged in the simplest manner,

than she felt that the chaste dignity and peculiar charm of her appearance would be marred by the slightest change.

For who but a woman is qualified to do ample justice to a woman?—to understand the majesty of her virtues,—to measure the greatness of her sacrifices,—the integrity of her nature,—the steadiness of her soul,—the warmth of her heart?—Unless when blinded by the bitterness of jealousy or corrupted by the meanness of envy, women are the best judges of the merits of their sex; and by a noble-minded woman alone, can the nobleness of woman be conceived.

No male writer of modern fiction, however gifted, could have invented the heroines of Joanna Baillie or Miss Edgeworth; nor was there one throughout the circle of Erskine's acquaintance, save his cousin Georgy, capable of estimating the real greatness of that humble wife,—that laborious mother,—that trustful Christian,—who, having no place in the peerage, was to *them* an inoffensive nonentity.

“I will not even *try* to tempt you by this trumpery,” said she, putting aside the jewel-

case she had brought. "You are just as you ought to be. Go, my dear cousin, go and put the finery of these great ladies to shame."

Nor was Miss Erskine less gratified on finding that her forethought about the carriage was rendered useless by the kindness of Lord Baltimore; who, little suspecting the cruel surmises excited by his attentions to the Erskines, had ordered his chariot to be in attendance for the wife of his friend.

Even *he* was not sorry to find the invitation given and accepted. On the first arrival in town of the Erskines, apprised by his visit to Apston of the humbleness of Margaret's origin and the miseries through which she had struggled, Lord Baltimore experienced some misgivings as to the effect of such vicissitudes of fortune on *any* female nature. But now that he was better acquainted with her, now that he appreciated her equanimity of character, and graceful simplicity of mind and manners, he felt reassured. *All* parties might benefit by her introduction at Powderham House; and if there mingled in this opinion any projects

concerning a certain handsome and amiable cousin of his friend Alick, whom he was in the habit of finding seated by Margaret's fireside in winter, and in summer beside her cheerful window overlooking the Thames, he was blind to the fact ; being still unconscious of his predilection in favour of Georgiana.

Great, meanwhile, was the gratification of Captain Erskine at the attentions bestowed on his wife at Powderham House. When kindly reproached by the Countess and her daughters for having so long delayed procuring them so charming an acquaintance, it was not for *him* to suggest that their own backwardness was alone to blame ; and so natural did it appear to him that they should do justice to his wife's superiority, and so beautiful did she really look in her unsullied purity of complexion and simplicity of costume among those fagged and faded women of fashion, that, had anybody mischievously hinted to him the motive of her being invited, and the suspicions to which she was exposed, he would have treated it as a preposterous jest.

Not even the *roué*, Lord Broadhaugh, however, nor even the saucy private secretary, retained so much as a shadow of their suspicions, after seeing the perfectly unembarrassed deportment of Mrs. Erskine in presence of Lord Baltimore and his family. The greatest of actresses could not have assumed such candour of countenance. Not one of them but was enchanted with her. To people of such high cast as the Powderhams, accustomed, from their cradles to their coffins, to look upon the same faces, and live in the same set, a new personage is seldom unacceptable; and though the great world arms itself at all points against a new-comer who has pushed his way into the magic circle, it is ever indulgent in its judgments of those promoted to its favour by its own will and pleasure.

The Powderham clique adopted Mrs. Erskine, in short, far more readily than it had previously adopted her husband. She was their last new caprice,—their last new toy. In those days of Chinese lanterns and fizgigs, it was not so difficult to become the fashion. The season was over; so that there

was less chance of rivalry in the affections of the whist players and old china-fanciers ; and the last thing done by the Earl and Countess in quitting town for the autumn, was to issue a most pressing invitation to the Erskines to join their party in September at Baltimore Castle.

“ I always told you, my dear Georgy, if you remember,” observed Sir John Erskine, to his daughter, when apprised of these growing distinctions, “ that my nephew was a very rising man.”

But while the amiable couple were thus “ achieving greatness ” by having it “ thrust upon them,” “ green grew the rushes, O ! ” in the Bournefields, and no man regarded ; loud grew the exclamations of the White House coterie on seeing it announced in the newspapers, that “ among the fashionables who had visited Baltimore Castle, in the course of the shooting season, were the Duke and Duchess of MacCallummore, the Duke and Duchess of Ulster, Prince Pietro di Guastalla and his sister the Countess of Termanini, the Marquis and Marchioness of Tottenham, the Earls of Fidzham, Hackness, and Flint,

Lord and Lady Thomas Thrapnell, and Captain and Mrs. Alexander Erskine ! ”

“CAPTAIN AND MRS. ALEXANDER ERSKINE !”—No ! For full a whole week Apston would not believe a word of it. The schoolmaster’s daughter, the half-pay captain’s bride ! The pauper and the cast-away, the sempstress, the mantua-maker of Hobart’s Farm,—IMPOSSIBLE ! It was a newspaper imposition, a fraud, a mere practice on their credulity. On second consideration, however, even Dr. Toddles and his sister were forced to avow, that the transition from lodgings in the Market Place to Somerset House, and from starvation on halfpay to a fat sinecure, was not more marvellous than this strange promotion. Mortifying as it was, therefore, the fact became established as incontestable ; and it was only Miss Lavinia, who, amid all the bitterness of her heart, continued to repeat,—“And why not, pray ? My cousin, whom you all thought proper to treat so disparagingly, is very highly connected ! All this does not surprise *me* ! But for his imprudent marriage, he might have become one of the most distinguished men in England !

Had he chosen to marry one of the daughters of Sir John Erskine, (to whose baronetcy he is heir-presumptive,) my cousin Alexander might have enjoyed *my* fortune, in addition to his hereditary rank. And then, pray, which of you would have seen anything extraordinary in his becoming a visiter at Baltimore Castle ?”

The surprise of the Toddles tribe, however, arose rather from the submission with which the man, gifted with “such appliances and means to boot,” had resigned himself to the privations of the Market Place; while Miss Lavinia, proud, even as matters stood, of her relationship with one so elevated above the vulgar sphere of the Apstonians, could scarcely forgive the officious parasites who had stirred up to so cruel a pitch her implacability against her cousin. After all, his transgressions were venial. After all, the Captain Erskine so honourably mentioned by *The Morning Post* and *Red Book*, was not the first imprudent man in the world who had married for love; and it was noticed with much anguish of spirit, by Toady Toddles, that Miss Lavinia was beginning to

accept the loan of the many newspapers daily pressed upon her use ; and that the spectacles of the old lady were invariably first directed towards the column of smoke, containing what is familiarly called “Fashionable Intelligence.”

But though, in the narrowness of her soul, she no longer found a pretext to persist in her disdain of Margaret moving in such aristocratic circles, she assumed, as the motive of a new inveteracy against Captain Erskine, the resentment he betrayed against her by abstaining from all overtures of reconciliation. “He fancied himself independent. He was evidently now too great a man even to recollect a country cousin. He had forgotten *her*, which was a proof that he had forgotten himself. She wished he might not live to repent it. But she had always heard it threatened, that ‘pride shall have a fall ;’ and these people had been raised in life too thoroughly above themselves, for *their* fall not to be equally signal. She wished no harm to Captain and Mrs. Erskine, but *luck* is not the surest thing to depend upon in this world !”

At present, it certainly seemed to justify some reliance on the part of the Erskines. Enjoying an unencumbered income of twelve hundred a-year, blessed with good health, good tempers, and a thriving family,—esteemed by their connexions, courted in society, the favour of which they had purchased by no capitulation of conscience, and supported amid its vacillations by the steady friendship of Lord Baltimore, it might be inferred that they had nothing to desire in this world.

But let the thorny bramble of human destiny achieve what height it may, the same intermingled thorns and blossoms which covered its branches while springing from the mire or overspreading the stones, are perceptible wherever it flourishes aloft. When on her return to town from spending the Christmas holidays at Baltimore Castle, accompanied by her two elder children, Margaret found the arms of the Carrolstowns and Wakehursts open to receive her ; and discovered, that in acquiring friends in the Powderhams, she had also acquired friends in her kinsfolk ; while listening to the adula-

tion of old Sir John, and the kindly counsels of Georgiana,—and admitting to herself that her comfortable home was about to receive new enhancement from the society of the many pleasant acquaintances made by her sojourn at Baltimore Castle, discontent arose anew in her bosom!—

“It is written, that no human happiness shall be unqualified!” murmured she, wiping away her tears. “Graceless that I am to repine!—If my poor dear father, if old Marjory of the Bournefields, or if any of those cruel people at Apston, could witness my position at this moment, would they not pronounce it brilliant, not only beyond my deserts, but beyond what could have been predicted by the wildest visionary for one like *me*?—And yet, and yet,—(God forgive me!)—I was happier in my old home in the Market Place, slaving for my children with Erskine constantly by my side, than here, where hollowness seems under my feet and in the hearts of all I live with!—A feeling of insecurity possesses me!—I can no longer stretch out my hand and be reassured by the pressure of that in which my strength

abided. I extend it and find a blank.—
Yes! I was certainly happier in my poor
old home!”—

For while Mrs. Erskine, in the dreariness
of a tedious evening, after vainly attempting
to divert her leisure by one of the vapid
books of the day, gave vent to these un-
grateful murmurs against Providence,—she
was again alone!—Again had a turn of the
wheel of fortune created new anxieties for
the mother and the wife! Captain Erskine
had not even accompanied her to Baltimore
Castle;—Captain Erskine had been hun-
dreds of miles distant from her,—spending
his Christmas in a circle no less august than
that of WINDSOR!—

The motive of Captain Erskine's admis-
sion to this august domicile was one which
did credit to the patriotism of George the
Fourth.

For some years past, as at the close of
every prolonged war, History had been oc-
cupying her leisure with the arrangement
of documents authenticating the feats of
nations; and England and France, alike
industrious in the task and eager to array

their rival caps with the fairest feathers, amused the rest of Europe not a little by assuming, each to herself, the conquest of the same fields of battle.

In spite of the publication of bulletins, standing orders, and official returns,—in spite of the memoirs of field-m Marshals and biographies of generalissimos,—many such points were still in hourly contest. *The Quarterly Review* reviewed the troops and manifestos of Paris; the *Revue de Paris*, the skirmishings of Albemarle Street.—No one appeared to be quite certain whether he had been beaten.

For, the workings of national vanity are as apt to engender delusions and misrepresentations as the vanity of individuals; and vainglory for the million, is as rampant and jactant a quality as the vainglory of a new sheriff or an old peer.

Colonies and countries are scarcely less addicted to the folly of inflating themselves into false consequence than the frog in the fable, puffing itself to the dimensions of the bull; and the bragging with which we tax the Americans, and the *blague* of

which we accuse the French, are more extensively emulated in England than accredits our national good sense.

While the Arc de Triomphe of Neuilly, like

London's column pointing to the skies,
Like a tall bully, lifts its head and lies,

concerning more than one of the minor victories of the great European war of the nineteenth century, it is audibly whispered throughout the rest of the world, that we claim for ourselves more than the British lion's share of laurels.

Such accusations can only be fairly disputed where the question has been publicly submitted to contemporary elucidation. Such perplexities can only be reduced to order when a clear-headed and right-hearted government sets about the task of enlightening *itself*, that it may command the means of enlightening others.—A king who will submit to be taught in order to teach others to the best advantage, is a prize in the lottery of history which may be estimated among the most valuable productions of the nineteenth century. As now, after the lapse of fifteen

years, the very whereabouts of the Royal Cottage is becoming problematical; at that period, (fifteen years after the action of Burgos,) its numbers and manœuvres were beginning to be made matter of disputation.

No person was more warmly interested in establishing, on a solid basis, the claims of national glory in these matters than the King. His own memory, on such questions, was of singular exactness; and to the utmost of his power did he facilitate the collation of the archives of the kingdom for the establishment of the truth. It happened that, one day at the royal dinner-table at Carlton House, a minor question of Peninsular tactics was brought on the tapis, in consequence of a bitter article in *The Edinburgh Review*, upon the personal memoirs of a distinguished field-marshal of the empire; and as there were present two of the cabinet ministers by whom the measure in question had been sanctioned, a general officer of division engaged in the affair, and, above all, the sovereign to whose regency History was likely to attribute the praise or blame of a movement insignificant in

itself, but vital in its consequences, it was likely that the subject would be discussed *avec connaissance de cause*.

Nevertheless, no two of the four individuals so deeply concerned in the matter could contrive to coincide ! They had been reading so much, and in such divers strains, about what they had done and said, and caused to be done and said, as to be somewhat puzzled in their recollections. Had they been placed upon their oath, it is probable that one or other of them must have been indicted for perjury. As usual in England, the dispute, though serious, and occurring at a royal table, became the origin of a bet ; as the arbitrator of which, the King selected Lord Powderham.

“ Surely, my dear lord,” said he, “ your son was serving in the very regiment that carried the bridge of Almeida ? What account has Lord Baltimore always given you of the affair ? ”

The Earl was puzzled. It was difficult to answer—“ The very reverse of the statement just made by your Majesty ! ”

“ My son, sir, was then only an inex-

perienced subaltern," was his cautious reply. "But with your Majesty's permission, I will apply to the officer who commanded Baltimore's company, and who, unless I am much mistaken, contributed largely to the success of the movement; Captain Erskine, whom I had the honour to present to your Majesty at the last levee of the season."

"Erskine? A junior commissioner of—, if I recollect?" rejoined the King, with his usual tenacity of memory.

Lord Powderham bowed affirmatively; adding a few laudatory words concerning his professional reputation and gentlemanly manners.

"Is he in town?—is he comeatable?" was the eager question of one engrossed at that moment by the desire to resolve his doubts. And on learning from the Earl that Captain Erskine was at Somerset House and his Majesty's orders, it was proposed that a few lines, and one of the royal carriages should bring him instantly to Carlton House.

By the express desire of the King, no intimation of the object of the summons was to be conveyed in the letter.

“ Let us have Captain Erskine’s unbiassed statement—let us have his unassisted recollections,” said the King ; and great was the consternation excited in consequence in the mind of the astonished Commissioner, while making a hasty toilet, to appear in the royal presence. Had such an incident occurred at St. Petersburg, the individual so hastily summoned, would probably have anticipated some *guet à pens*—the knout, or impalement. As it was, Captain Erskine’s mind misgave him, only that he might be the dupe of a bold mystification on the part of some trifler of the Powderham clique.

It was, however, really into the brilliant drawing-room of George the Fourth he was ushered on his arrival ; and the graceful urbanity with which the King, who was taking his coffee, thanked him for the promptitude of his attendance, and explained to him the object of his presence, did honour to the high breeding of the most polished gentleman in Europe, and placed the other instantly at ease.

Fortunately for Erskine, the personages present, so intimately connected with the

question, were not known to him by sight. The only man in the royal circle with whom he was acquainted, was Lord Powderham, whose presence served rather to reassure him than embarrass. Without a moment's hesitation, therefore, he stated his personal convictions on the question in dispute. He had been severely wounded on the occasion, and had found ample leisure on the bed of sickness to examine and engrave on his memory the details of an affair, slight in itself, but important in its consequences. As these happened to coincide, to a hair, both in point of numbers engaged, and the manœuvres attempted, with the reminiscences of the King, a murmur of admiration and satisfaction instantly arose in the circle. There was no disputing the testimony of so disinterested and circumstantial a witness.

Needless were it to add, that the King, delighted with his own triumph, and the mild deportment of his unconscious champion, was strongly predisposed in favour of his accidental guest. The name of Sir John Erskine was known to him, as an active

transatlantic adherent to Government and the loyalist cause. The answer of Captain Erskine to a few inquiries on that and other professional questions, completed the prepossession of the King ; and no one who witnessed the introduction and its results, was surprised to find, shortly afterwards, that Captain Erskine had been bidden to the royal table.

On that occasion, the King, with his usual considerateness, gratified his guest by again making him the referee of a disputed point of the Peninsular campaigns. Attributing to clearness of intellect the result of mere retentiveness of memory, his Majesty exaggerated to himself the abilities of his new acquaintance ; more especially when it transpired, through the friendly intervention of Lord Powderham, that he was one of the best whist-players in London !

More than one ambitious man about town would have given tens of thousands for the gracious notice accorded from that moment to Captain Erskine.

PART V.

SUCH was the worldly position which wrung tears from the gentle eyes of Margaret. She had borne, with signal patience, the adversity shared by her husband; she submitted with less resignation to the prosperity tending to their domestic disunion. For now, alas! they were often apart. Margaret had no pretensions to be presented at court. It was much if the King were aware that his pleasant guest was a husband and a father. At all events, it was not in *that* capacity he was sought as a guest at the Royal Cottage.

Happy was it, perhaps, for Mrs. Erskine that her eldest-born was a girl. For already her boy was at school, while Lily became her mother's pupil and companion; and it afforded serious occupation to her leisure to rub off the rust of the scholarship bestowed

upon her by her good old father, for the benefit of her promising girl.

Still there wanted, even to the discharge of this duty, the incentive of her husband's approving smile; for it was too much to expect from the man whose hours were divided between the responsibilities of office, and the brilliancies of royal festivity, any very intense interest in the progress of copy-books, or the mysteries of universal history. Captain Erskine crossed the threshold of his comparatively sombre home, prepared to relate rather than to listen. He evidently attributed more importance to the slightest remark addressed to him by royal lips, than to the slow proficiency of a child; and after conversing of the affairs of Europe with ambassadors and ministers of state, the *bon-mots* of a little wit of three years old lost somewhat of their importance in his ears.

All this Margaret could not resent, for she knew it to be natural; but she did not the less deplore her loss in the extinction of perfect sympathy between them. She fancied, indeed, that no distinctions of royal

hospitality would have estranged her interest from her own dear nursery and schoolroom. But this arose as little from personal merit, as the worldliness of her husband from an individual fault. She rightly attributed the difference to the inferior warmth of feeling characterizing his sex.

Without intending it, Lord Baltimore increased her unavowed displeasures.

“My mother wants you and Erskine to come down to Baltimore at Easter,” said he; “and, of course, there is always room in the old house for as many children as you choose to bring.”

“Lady Powderham has kindly written to me on the subject,” was Margaret’s reply; “and I was in hopes of being able to accept her invitation. She mentions that Lady Mary’s marriage is to take place in Easter week.”

“Yes; Greatoux fancies himself chained to town till the holidays, by his duty to his constituents; and my father, of course, sides with him, as he happens to belong to our party. But why can’t you come?”

“Captain Erskine expects an invitation to

Windsor, and must, of course, hold his time undisposed of."

"By Jove ! Erskine is getting as great a courtier as the rest of them," cried Lord Baltimore, in a tone of vexation ; and Margaret did not altogether succeed in repressing the shake of the head which accompanied her smile at the charge.

"It is *your* doing," said she, at length. "You have made us sad vain-glorious people."

"No ! on my soul !—I have nothing of the kind upon my conscience," exclaimed Lord Baltimore. "I look upon courtiership as too thoroughly a game of chance, to wish to see the destinies of those I regard embarked in the hazard. It is a vocation which, like diplomacy, no man should embrace who cannot afford to live without it."

"All we possess is so completely the fruit of your friendship," observed Mrs. Erskine, earnestly, in reply to a remark so earnest, "that, even had I the will, it is out of my power to conceal from you the precarious nature of our fortunes."

"But Erskine, of *course*, insures his life ?"

demanded Lord Baltimore. "It was the first measure I suggested to him on his coming hither; and he seemed fully persuaded of the necessity."

"Yes; I have heard him speak of such a precaution as the duty of all official men towards their families."

"But are you not *certain* of his having effected a policy of insurance on his life?"

"It would scarcely have become *me* to press such an inquiry," replied Mrs. Erskine, with a deep blush. "To show solicitude on such a point,—I—who was portionless,—who—"

"You are the mother of children," resumed Lord Baltimore, more sternly; "and it is your paramount duty to look to their interests."

"An insurance on a life (so good, thank God, as my husband's) is a costly thing, I believe, to accomplish?" observed Mrs. Erskine; betraying by the remark that the subject *had* been discussed between her and her husband.

"Certainly. It could not be done without sacrifice; but it is a sacrifice incumbent

on the father of a family. Between ourselves, dear Mrs. Erskine, I often think with anxiety on the uncertain tenure of your fortunes. Courtiership, among the other evils attached to the vocation, is an expensive calling. Royalty perceives no difference in the income of the man of twelve thousand a-year, and the man of twelve hundred; and these constant journeys and gratuities; the expenses of dress, servants, and equipage; to say nothing of the heavy pull of the whist-table; are somewhat beyond the means of one whose business it is to lay by, at least, a fourth of his incomings."

"Captain Erskine is so good a player," said Margaret, unwilling to coincide, unable to deny, unwilling to confirm, "that I fancy he has nothing to fear from losses at play."

"Perhaps not; but the habit of risking a ten times higher stake than he has a right to hazard, destroys his just appreciation of money. A false standard is ever before his eyes; he becomes accustomed to trifle with sums which he ought to regard as serious."

Mrs. Erskine no longer attempted to reply. Too painfully was she convinced of

the truth of all this. She knew that, in the plentitude of their prosperity, they were contracting debts. She had heard with consternation her husband talk of employing a certain fashionable tailor, “because he was a capital fellow who (Midge assured him) never bored people for money.” Lord Baltimore was justified in his suspicion, that the moral principle of Erskine’s noble nature was deteriorated.

To divert the conversation from so delicate a point, she reverted to the marriage of Lady Mary Baltimore and Lord John Greatoux.

“I believe they will be tolerably happy, as times go,” was his reply to her congratulations. “They have the same tastes and ambitions; both are wedded to the world, and ought to agree when wedded to each other.”

A pang shot through the heart of Margaret. She fancied that this marked eulogy of well-assorted marriages, arose from the cloud he saw gathering over her own—her own, so full of disproportion!—But Lord Baltimore contemplated only a *moral* equality.

“For *my* part,” added he, bitterly, “the longer I live, the more I am inclined to wonder at any person’s risking the contrarieties of matrimony. In the perversity of human nature,—because my father and mother torment my soul out to marry,—I have all but vowed a vow to live and die a bachelor.”

He did not think it necessary to apprise Mrs. Erskine that this resolution arose from an intimation made by Lord Powderham, (on sounding the depths of his paternal liberality,) that fortune must be his primary consideration in the choice of a wife. But he *did* hope she might repeat it to Miss Erskine, so as to neutralize any expectation she might have formed, from the nature of his attentions whenever they met at Somerset House.

But on glancing towards his companion, to ascertain the effect produced by his declaration, he saw that Margaret’s feelings were otherwise absorbed. Tears were in her eyes, and anxiety for her husband in her heart.

He now, for the first time, noticed how

much thinner and paler she had become since her arrival in town. Though still a lovely woman, she was ten years older; and bitterly did he accuse himself of having overlooked the change. In his growing partiality for the pleasant society of Georgiana, he had taken too little thought of the cares beginning to shed their thorns in the path of Margaret.

“But even if Erskine be unable to accompany you to Baltimore at Easter,” said he, “why not bring the children? It will do you all good. You are pining, my dear Mrs. Erskine, in the confinement of London. You were not born for our atmosphere; you want the fields and forests to restore you. You want the sunshine of the country.”

“I want the sunshine of the soul!” burst involuntarily from the quivering lips of Margaret; and the tears now flowing unrestrainedly from her eyes, appealed so forcibly to the feelings of her companion, that, rising from his seat and approaching her, he took her hand with brotherly interest, while uttering a few broken words, *not* of comfort, but exhortation.

Unluckily, before either of them had recovered their composure, the door was thrown open, and Adolphus Midge (who, ever since the favour of royalty brightened the prospects of Captain Erskine, had assumed a violent friendship towards him, as a better speculation than his pretended passion for the pretty duchess,) made his appearance, with an official message from Lord Powderham.

“Where is Erskine?”—cried he, evidently confused by the untimeliness of his *entrée*. “I want excessively to see Erskine.” And Margaret, with whom the time-serving Secretary was no favourite, unluckily found no better answer than — “You should have gone straight to his office. At this time of day, Captain Erskine is *always* engaged at the Board.”

The significant smile with which Midge received this candid statement, caused the blood to rush into the cheeks of Lord Baltimore, not with shame, but indignation. Without surmising that suspicion had been attached to his conduct towards the Erskines through the malicious interpretation of the

Secretary, he felt how fatally the circumstances under which they were now discovered, laid them open to the slanders of an evil tongue.

“If you are going in search of Erskine, Mr. Midge,” said he, “give me leave to accompany you. I also came hither with a message to him; and shall be glad to take back his answer to my mother. By the way, perhaps *you* can save me the trouble of the visit, by informing me whether he spends the holidays at Windsor?”

Lord Baltimore rightly conjectured that Midge’s attention would be distracted by this hint that a party was forming at Baltimore Castle to which he had received no invitation; and, as the Secretary professed ignorance of Captain Erskine’s engagements, they agreed to proceed together to his office.

Their departure was a signal for a renewal of the tears of Margaret. Not because any idea that the nature of Lord Baltimore’s attentions could be made the subject of calumny, glanced across her mind. To *her* he was only her husband’s benefactor; and the moment *he* avowed anxiety

on Erskine's account, she felt herself indeed privileged to be wretched !—

On hurrying home that day from an audience at the Treasury (from which Midge drove him in his cab,) to dress in the utmost haste for a dinner at the mansion of a distinguished satellite of the Carlton Court, her husband found the eyes of his gentle Margaret swollen with weeping ; and eager were his inquiries as to the origin of her grief.

Had anything happened to her or the children ?—Had any one offended her ?—Finding, however, that he could extract from her nothing but negatives, easily mistaken for sullen, and being, as he more than once reminded her, “in the deuce of a hurry,” he was obliged to defer his investigations and consolations till a more convenient season : “Lord Grassfield being the sort of punctual man who was not to be kept waiting.”

While proceeding to his dinner-party as fast as a hackney-coach could rumble, his mind naturally reverted to the low spirits of his wife.

“ I wonder what can have put poor Margy so plaguily out?” was his conjugal soliloquy. “ Midge told me he found Baltimore sitting with her at five o’clock ; so that she cannot have been fretting, as she sometimes does, for want of company. But I verily believe women love to cry a little now and then, to get rid of their vapours !— When they have no family cares, they expend their tears on some sentimental novel. I should have thought Margy had enjoyed enough of weeping in earnest, in our darker days, to find pleasure in crying for nothing.”

While the fortunes of the Erskines were undergoing these singular transitions, Apston pursued the tenor of its sleepy way. Spring after spring renewed the velvet margin of the Severn, while the noble river reflected the unmeaning smile on the foolish face of the little town, as it gazed down upon the flowing waters it knew not how to turn to account.—Its streets were still green with grass ; its tabby coteries bitter with spite.

How could it be expected to reconcile itself to the fact that one so devoid of personal merit as Miss Lavinia, should en-

joy over her fellow Apstonians not only the advantage of a residence like the White House, and the possession of nearly one hundred thousand pounds, three per cent. consols,—but of a kinsman beloved of earls, and entitled to share the bread and salt of royalty!—For though they knew the precise degree of affection subsisting between her and her cousin, she did not scruple to queen it over them to the full extent of his courtly favour.

Whenever an Apstonian had an object to accomplish in public life, Miss Lavinia was sure to remind them that, “had they behaved more graciously to Captain Erskine during his sojourn among them, they might now reap the benefit of his influence at Court;” and on the days when the newspapers announced his arrival at, or departure from Windsor, there was no calling at the White House. No longer adverting to “Alick’s prospect of a baronetcy,” as a thing worthy his inheritance, the country-cousin seemed to fancy it depended entirely on his own whim and fancy at what period he chose to be made a peer. In her heart of

hearts, she did not altogether despair of seeing him figure in the House of Lords as “Alexander Baron Apston.”

Yet all the recognition bestowed by Captain Erskine since his establishment in London upon the “*ingrata patria*” of his wife, was occasionally to commend it to the care of the worst of angels; while even Margaret (though in her reveries she still reverted to the Bournefields and Severn-side as the scene of her nearest approach to perfect happiness) held no further communication with Apston than by a commission to the Hobarts to redeem for her from the present possessors, whoever they might be, the few sets of books presented to her father by his pupils, with which extremity of poverty had compelled her to part.

But if the Erskines obeyed in their prosperity as implicitly as in their adversity, Miss Lavinia’s admonition to “let her hear no more of them,” the old lady felt convinced that the time would come when the voice of nature must cry aloud in their hearts. She was still in monthly, weekly, daily, and hourly expectation of hearing

from her cousin. Laying to her stubborn soul the flattering unction that a letter might at any time be on the road, dated from the precincts of royalty, expressing contrition and entreating a restoration to favour, she was encouraged in her bitter nigger-driving over the victims of her caprices, by full reliance on an eventual reconciliation with her nearest of kin.

Never, however, was there less probability of any concession of the kind. Induced in the first instance to dismiss her from his thoughts as something bitter and odious,—a woman who had wronged his wife and neglected his children,—nothing now recalled her to his recollection. As a matter of policy, he considered the inheritance a lost case: and there was nothing in common between such a person and those among whom he abided. Having forgotten his own people and his father's house,—having forgotten his days of adversity and good resolutions, how was he likely to remember the crabbed old maid of the White House!—

Meanwhile the good seed scattered by the friendship of Lord Baltimore in the

field he was accused by Adolphus Midge of trying to sow with tares, was bringing forth fruit. The attention of Margaret, once directed to the perils of her situation, she did not again lose sight of them. Since new hazard of poverty was incurred by their recent accession of income, she found courage to treat it *like* poverty,—to retrench and economize. She rose earlier, she worked harder, she devoted herself more sedulously to the education of the children, the care of their apparel, the superintendence of their lives. Like a Roman matron, she took her share of the labours of her hand-maidens, and was not ashamed.

Instead of allowing herself to be persuaded, as had been nearly the case, to accompany Lady Carrolstown now and then to the opera, or appear in the Park in the brilliant equipage of Mrs. Wakehurst, she set to work as diligently as she had ever done under the orders of Dame Hobart's family in her humble lodging in the Market Place.

All this passed unnoticed by her husband. His life was beginning to be as the phan-

tasm of a dream. Between the pauses of his official life, he had always some royal commission to execute, some person to visit, or object to see, at the suggestion of the king.

Adolphus Midge, who never set foot in the royal presence, but was aware of Erskine's triumphs from the missives he had often to indite in Lord Powderham's name, suggested to the favourite that he ought to obtain an appointment in the Royal Household.

“ Who will obtain it *for* me ? ” cried Erskine, laughing. “ Lord Powderham (as no one knows better than yourself) has done marvels for me ; and it would be monstrous on my part to expect him to do more. From what I have seen of the King, though the kindest natured of men, he is one of the last to whom such a project would occur, unless suggested to him by others. He has probably been told that I am in the enjoyment of excellent places, and concludes me to possess a certain amount of private fortune. Were I to make a profession of poverty, I should proclaim myself unfitted for the position to which his kindness has

promoted me. No chance, therefore, of the promotion to which you allude, unless at the proposition of some better friend than I am ever likely to obtain at court!"—

"But consider your claims upon Baltimore!"

"Heaven knows they have been a thousandfold discharged," cried Captain Erskine.

"Obligations of that kind are never fully discharged. He, at least, is, I am sure, of that opinion."

"The more reason that I should think otherwise."

"Besides, he has such a strong personal affection for you all; not only for yourself, but for the children,—*for Mrs. Erskine!*"—

"Yes! he loves the children almost like a father!" exclaimed Erskine, with a degree of simplicity which Midge regretted the necessity of enjoying without a confederate. "And he would, I really believe, do anything in the world for Margaret. No one better understands her value. But I should be ashamed if he fancied there *could* be occasion to do anything for her. We are fifty times better off than I ever expected. 'Tis

true, I have a hag of a maiden aunt, with a fortune of three thousand a-year, and not another relation in the world, who once declared me her heir and has turned her back upon us.—But on *her* I have long ceased to count.”

“ Still, the case is not hopeless ! ”

“ Perfectly so. In fact, I have no excuse for not living within my income, except that, on first coming to town, a thousand little expenses occur which do not happen again. A year or two hence, I shall be rich again. —A year or two hence, I shall have brought matters round ! ”

“ I was afraid, my dear fellow,” said Midge, (perceiving Erskine in the vein to be communicative,) “ I was *afraid* you were going it a *little* fast ! ”

“ Between ourselves, the last time I was at the Cottage, there was fearful betting going on ! I kept, of course, out of it ; for a five-pound-note staked here and there, (more in the way of conversation and accidentally than for anything else,) does not pass for betting. It makes a sad hole, however, in a slender pocket-book,—as I dare

say you have found before now. I am looking forward anxiously to quarter-day !”

“ But your banker can set any trifle of that kind straight for you,” observed Midge carelessly.

“ When I was on service, my agent was my banker ; now I receive my half-pay myself. What has a poor hand-to-mouth fellow like myself to do with a banker ?”

“ Precisely what I said just now ;—obtain his assistance in making two ragged ends meet. If you want a couple of hundred pounds, I will take you to mine, who will, I am satisfied, be happy to oblige you—I will explain matters to him. Your salary can be paid over to *him*.—*I* will take care of the arrangements.”—

Captain Erskine, really in want of the sum specified, gratefully accepted the offer. He had left home that morning, dreading lest Margaret should apply to him for the means of meeting certain family expenses, never before allowed to accumulate ; and could not contemplate, without pain, the necessity of explaining to her how far he had exceeded their prudent resolutions.

To evade this painful explanation,—to be able to volunteer the payments he was afraid of being exposed to refuse,—was a delightful alternative. After signing a receipt and pocketing the money, he could hardly forbear taking a precipitate leave of Midge, and rushing back to his wife.—As yet, the world had done no more than harden the *surface* of his heart.

On the other hand, Margaret was too fond and discriminating an observer, not to have been fully, though silently, aware of his want of money.—She knew him to be by nature generous and just ; and had seen him, of late, betrayed into illiberal and scarcely equitable acts by what she justly inferred to be inability to put his hand into his pocket. When, therefore, she saw him suddenly expand into joyous generosity, like a sailor who has received his prize-money or a lawyer after gorging the costs of a chancery suit, she shuddered at the idea that the money thus flowing through his hands, must be the product of success at the card-table. The conjecture was wormwood to her. She had no longer

courage to cut out the new dresses he presented her. She could not bear to see the children playing with their costly toys. There was the price of tears upon them. It was not the moment for receiving the salaries of either of his offices ;—she could not doubt that he had been winning at play !—

Some evil result is sure to follow the extinction of confidence between a married couple. Had Erskine avowed the truth to his wife, it would have been far less painful than this humiliating and groundless surmise,—a surmise of which she had no means of diminishing the bitterness ; for she would have considered it a crime to confide such an imputation to either of her friends, Lord Baltimore, or her cousin Georgiana.

But while *she* sank dispirited and afraid, very different was the result of this new command of money on the temper of her husband. Erskine was becoming reckless and flighty as a boy. He was what is called up to anything ; and with such predispositions, everything is soon proposed to a man.

Midge had already introduced him to a circle of official men, younger and less consequential than he was in the habit of meeting at Powderham House. His gentlemanly appearance and reputation as a royal favourite, rendered him an object of attention. He was elected into a leading club ; and many were the pleasant bachelor-parties he was forced to join. Beginning to fancy himself a wondrous good judge of a horse, he took a lively interest in the betting books of other men. He seemed, indeed, to plunge into the natural diversions of his sex, with an appetite the more eager from having been so long restricted to petticoat association.

It was not, as Captain Erskine often assured himself, that he valued his home the less ; but, after his official worries, he wanted recreation. His wife was not at leisure to devote herself to him as formerly. Her time was absorbed by Lily's education. His boy was at school ; the others mere play-things. No fault of his, therefore, if he were driven abroad for society !

To Margaret he only remarked, that he

was glad to ride or drive with Midge, Lord Henry Greatoux, or Sir John Hall, because he had almost lost sight of Baltimore. "He was convinced Baltimore was in love, and that the course of his true love did not run smooth. Baltimore, when they *did* meet, was always out of spirits, and took care that they should meet but seldom."

Margaret listened with a pang. For she knew that he was not speaking the *whole* truth; and since he stooped to be disingenuous, inferred the worst. She had little doubt that their excellent friend avoided her husband's company, because disgusted by his propensity for play.

Her disapproving silence seemed so morose, as to justify Captain Erskine in joining that day a dinner at the Clarendon, given by Lord Henry Greatoux on his brother's marriage, to which he had meditated sending an excuse. He went, therefore, and drank deep ere he departed; and, after drinking deep with men of the age and habits of Lord Henry, Midge, and Co., the transition was easy to Graham's—whither his friends were in the habit of resorting.

He even fancied he returned home that night an exemplary character, because he had not been tempted to *borrow* money, (having luckily none in his pocket,) in order “to try his luck” at the hazard-table !

Such was poor Erskine’s new code of morality !—Such the disordered state of his principles !—

There are two instances in which a man cannot cast up his accounts too often—in reckoning with his conscience, and reckoning with his banker. The moment he begins to trust to his memory,—the moment his perceptions of pounds, shillings, and pence, and right or wrong, become in the slightest degree indefinite,—his affairs, temporal and spiritual, are in a bad way.

There was, however, little temptation to Erskine to make short *his* reckonings. He did not so enormously exceed as to make the danger imminent. Every one still applauded and approved, — every one still trusted ; and, while he beheld constantly scattered around him, from the hand of prodigality, such piles of gold, such marvels of

luxury, how could he be expected to recollect that the richest mine may become exhausted?

He had, in truth, no time for reflection. He was either always busy or always amused. His children adored him, were thriving, and well-dressed. His wife received him with a smile; and he had no leisure to examine whether that smile arose, as of old, out of the depths of her heart; or to whose care and industry he was indebted for the tenderness and attractive aspect of his children.

Like most men of his set, so long as the earth brought forth good fruits and he had an appetite for their enjoyment, he was content to eat, drink, and be merry, without inquiring by what hand the branches were pruned or the roots watered.

At length came to pass the event so long ambitioned by Erskine, to secure his future fortunes in life.—A place in the royal household,—a place that would more than double his present income,—was offered to his acceptance.

“Have a care!” was the warning remon-

strance of Baltimore. "This post is untenable with your commissionership."

"But the salary is more than twice as considerable."

"The commissionership is permanent."

"The place may be *considered* permanent; for when was the King ever known to dismiss a member of his household, unless for some heinous offence, such as, I trust, I am incapable of giving?"

"The King himself is not permanent!"—observed Lord Baltimore.

"You are not proceeding the treasonous length of imagining the death of the king?" cried Captain Erskine, laughing, "who is in the prime of life, when we consider the great age attained by his father."

"The princes of the House of Brunswick are certainly long-lived. But since, by accepting this place, you forfeit a permanent home for your wife and family—"

"I attain the means of hiring another, and a more commodious one!" interrupted Erskine; "and you will admit that Somerset House is horribly out of the way."

“ Out of the way for a man of your present habits. I did not consider it so when first you came to town,—neither did you.”

Erskine coloured slightly at the allusion. It was a remark often made to him by Margaret, in answer to his grumblings, whenever he found himself late for a dinner in May Fair; and it suddenly occurred to him, that the man so familiar with her arguments, had perhaps been instigated by his wife to recommend his retaining the commissioner-ship and her present house.

This surmise hardened his heart. No man can bear the idea of his wife engaging auxiliaries against him. There is something of anti-conjugal confederacy in such a proceeding, which amounts to treachery. For the first time, he assigned unpleasant importance to the remark so often made by Dodo Midge,—“ There is nothing in the world Lord Baltimore would not do for Mrs. Erskine !”

From the slightest surmise of a jealous mind to the strongest, there is but a step; for the pace of the seven-league-booted

ogre, is nothing to that of jealousy, — over-leaping all bounds, and defying the limits of time and place.—No sooner did it occur to Erskine that those who, however estranged by circumstances from his worldly heart, were the objects dearest to him on earth, might be still dearer to each other, than he began to tax himself as the most miserable of dupes !

It is true that, if less than an angel, Margaret must be a fiend, and Baltimore, if other than a true and loyal friend, a dissembler, base indeed ; and that such treachery as, in bare suspicion, caused a cold dew to start upon his frame, would justify the severest retribution.—But it was impossible !—Such black hypocrisy abided not even in the most heinousness of fallen human nature !

But while he recoiled from the ungrateful injury of imputing criminality, or criminal intentions, to the best of wives and friends, his feelings were sufficiently disturbed by the momentary suspicions which had warped his judgment, to determine him to an immediate resignation of the Commissionership. The

moment his friend left him, he went straight to Lord Powderham for the purpose; and the Earl, partly from dutiful conviction, and partly because it was agreeable enough to have such a piece of patronage again at his disposal, assured him he was acting most judiciously; and that, situated as he was, any demur concerning acceptance of the royal favour conferred upon him, would be ruinous to his prospects in life;—all he had to do was to kiss hands and be thankful.

Half inclined, in his present state of feeling towards Lord Baltimore, to fancy that *his* very different counsels and view of the case must have proceeded from sinister motives, Captain Erskine put a sort of angry precipitancy into every measure connected with his change of condition. He engaged a house at the west end of the town, without consulting either his wife or his friend. He seemed to fancy them a majority against him which he could only defeat by stratagem; and the first mention which Margaret heard of her new residence, was after the signature of the lease!

Perhaps the angry husband surmised that,

if consulted, she would suggest a more moderate establishment, to secure the economy daily more essential to their affairs. But against such advice, he felt armed by the consciousness of better acquaintance with the world in which he moved. What should *she* know of the feelings of his Majesty on such points? How could *she* be aware of his desire that those honoured by his favour should exhibit the gloss of prosperity?

With a heavy heart, therefore, did Margaret take possession of her new habitation. Her saddened mind's eye beheld it encompassed with a hedge of thorns. She knew it to be beyond their means; not their apparent means and nominal income of two thousand a-year, but the portion of it which their encumbrances and the prospects of their children entitled them to expend. Trouble had rendered her wise. If at Somerset House she had been sometimes tempted to sigh for her humble lodgings at Apston, how often, in her new abode, was she likely to regret her gratuitous home at Somerset House.

She regretted it, too, on other accounts.

The close, narrow street she was henceforward to inhabit, looked like a prison to her children, after the cheerful panorama of the Thames, to which their eyes were accustomed. They seemed suddenly deprived of light and air. They missed their broad terrace and the Temple Gardens. Even the parks seemed to want the embellishment of the busy movements of their beloved river.

These, however, were minor grievances. The real evil of the house was the loss of all pretext for withdrawing from the attention of the Carrolstowns, Wakehursts, Powderhams, Greatouxes and innumerable new friends and acquaintances entailed upon her by the hospitalities of Baltimore Castle.

“For Lily’s sake, you must not be *too* ungracious to these people!” was Miss Erskine’s advice. “Three or four years hence, you will be glad enough to take her to their balls and parties.”

But Margaret, who knew that the interval of those three or four years must be devoted to the severe discharge of her maternal duties towards a family of half a

dozen children, who had seldom an hour at her disposal, and looked upon every frivolous expense as a crime, looked with a tearful eye upon the cards left upon her table by some of the greatest of the land. Such empty honours afforded her no pleasure. Amid the clatter of the London spring, with its uproar of equipages and vanities, she longed for the wings of a bird that she might flee away and be at rest. Could some benevolent genius have indulged her wish at that moment, it would have been to find herself strolling with her darling children among the green pastures of the Bournefields, as in her childhood she had strayed there with her parents—in her maturity, with the object of her affections. It seemed to her prejudiced heart as if the spring could not break so auspiciously in any other spot ; as if no forget-me-nots could be so blue, no turf so green, as those which had refreshed her eyes in the rare holidays of her laborious days of early probation.

She sometimes wished she had courage to talk about these things to Georgiana Erskine, for whom she entertained a sincere

regard. But Georgiana was the kinswoman of her husband ; and, reluctant as she would have been to utter to *any* human being a syllable implying blame of him towards whom she still experienced the gratitude of an humble nature, it seemed doubly sinful to depreciate him in the eyes of one so near akin ; more particularly since, while the rest of the family, and the world in general, redoubled their attentions to the royal favourite, Georgiana became every year less friendly to him.

While gradually progressing into “Cousin Alick,” with her sisters, he had become only Captain Erskine with her ; perhaps, because no one noted more sorrowfully the unsettled nature of his accounts with his banker and his conscience, or measured his demerits so accurately by the standard of the virtues of his wife.

Mrs. Erskine refrained, therefore, from anything amounting to confidence. The only mark of preference she showed Georgiana over her sisters was that, after exerting herself to meet with spirit the lively sallies of the brilliant Lady Carrolstown, in

presence of Georgiana she gave way unreservedly to her depression. But she submitted to hear those grave looks attributed to indisposition, rather than avow the cares that were eating into her heart. Nor was this a mere pretext: she *was* indisposed. The few years of prosperity which had elapsed since their settlement in London, had exercised a more injurious effect upon her constitution than the ten preceding ones of toil and privation.

Meanwhile, the bad health or bad spirits of Margaret, no matter which, afforded additional motive for the visits of Georgiana. The new habitation of her cousins was within a walk of her own, and her father too much absorbed in his courtship of a rich widow, whose acquaintance he had made at Cheltenham, to take heed of her comings and goings. Scarcely a day passed, therefore, without her finding her way to South Street. Her presence was no obstruction to the children's lessons. Her visits were no obstacle to those of Lord Baltimore. The little Erskines fancied they got on better when cousin Georgy was there. Perhaps, in his heart,

Lord Baltimore thought so too ; for, aware of the impossibility of obtaining a settlement from his embarrassed father, Lord Baltimore abstained, from scruples of conscience, from profiting by Sir John Erskine's invitations, lest he should give rise to expectations which it was out of his power to fulfil. Yet, with the logic peculiar to lovers, he seemed to think he was doing no injury to Georgiana by cultivating her preference, and seeking her society at the house of a third person.

It is true, that there was every temptation to a man in love so to indulge himself. A warm mutual sympathy in the destinies of Margaret and her children, afforded some pretext for the pleasure they took in each other's society ; and, being the only two persons systematically admitted as morning visitors in South Street, or rather as visitors at any hour, it was a pleasure they enjoyed unmolested. Lord Baltimore was as sure of a daily interview with Georgiana, as though he had obtained the consent of both families to their marriage, and the settlements were in progress.

How was he to surmise, that the more he devoted himself to Miss Erskine, the greater the colouring lent to certain groundless scandals devised by the chattering private secretary? How to conjecture that, while entertaining no wish on earth but to become the happy husband of an amiable, companionable, unaffected girl, he was incurring the charge of undermining the household happiness of another?

It was natural that, the longer the absences of Captain Erskine at Windsor and Brighton, the more assiduous the visits of his friend. A thousand attentions purported to mark to Mrs. Erskine Lord Baltimore's gratitude for the patience with which she bore his intrusions, and turned a blind eye and deaf ear to his unavowed courtship of her cousin. But, alas, the blindness and kindness for which he and Georgy were so thankful to her, proceeded only from the pre-occupation of a care-crazed mind. She saw nothing that was going on. On her bantering Miss Erskine, upon some occasion, on Lord Baltimore's attachment, she had replied—"I give you my honour, he never

made me the smallest avowal of regard :” and Margaret instantly concluded herself mistaken ; more particularly because, on venturing a similar hint in a confidential manner, to her husband’s friend, he had answered in a tone of grave displeasure—“ I am not aware of showing any preference for Miss Erskine. I should, in fact, be inexcusable for doing so, as I am never likely to marry. The state of my father’s affairs renders it impossible.”

After so frank an avowal on both sides, Margaret had every reason to infer, that their visits to South Street had no other motive than kindness towards herself ; and as these frequent visits were somewhat of an interruption to her matronly and maternal duties, she was thankful to them for contenting themselves with each other’s society ; which they enjoyed, while she read, or wrote, or worked, as comfortably as though no Margaret were in existence !

Adolphus Midge, meanwhile, was fully justified in his remark, that “ It was a good thing for Balty’s cab-horse, that Erskine had given up his Commissionership ; ay,

and for Balty too, who was able to spend three hours a day in South Street, instead of two hours and a half at Somerset House."

PART VI.

A SCANDALOUS rumour once created in that temple of echoes, the world of fashion, impossible to guess from what quarters, or in how many innumerable directions, arise the side-winds that give it force and publicity!—

People, who had never heard the name of Mrs. Erskine, began to talk of her the moment it appeared there was something infamous to be said; something infamous that coupled her name with that of a lord. The low and vulgar, and high and vulgar,—footmen gossiping in the hall, or duchesses in the drawing-room,—made mention of her for the first time: some observing that it was a melancholy thing for Captain Erskine; some, that it was a shocking thing for the Powderhams; but no one compassion-

ating the supposed victim. Nothing too bad could be said of Margaret ;—nothing too bad could befall her.

Such was the view taken of the case during the first expansion of the slander so cautiously whispered by Midge as to ensure its circulation. For everybody expected a catastrophe ; and chose to be prepared beforehand with a becoming store of virtuous indignation. But when they found there was no explosion, — that the royal favourite neither shut his door upon his wife, nor kicked his friend down stairs,—that he called nobody out, and turned nobody out,—a reaction took place, and they admitted they might have been a little hard upon “ poor Mrs. Erskine !”

Those acquainted with her, therefore, left cards at her door ; and those *not* acquainted with her, determined to ask an introduction. In the course of a week or two, all agreed that Lord Baltimore, being so charming a person, they did not wonder she found pleasure in his society ; and that Mrs. Erskine, being so interesting a woman, it was only natural he should pass his life in her house. Such

is usually the way *liaisons* are dealt with in London, where all parties concerned appear acquiescent, and make no parade of their sins. It was not the fault of the tolerant public that the intimacy between Lord Baltimore and the wife of his friend was of so harmless a nature.

To one spot of the kingdom, however, that idle tale had reached, where it excited real indignation. Apston, usually deaf as an adder to the rumours of the world, had strangely enough contrived to ascertain the abominable construction placed by society upon the friendship between Margaret and her husband's benefactor.

Doctor Toddles, having occasion to visit London, (to consult an aurist concerning the disablement of his last surviving tympanum,) condescended to drink tea with one of his grand-nephews, a medical student, who thought to do him honour by inviting to meet him a former King's College chum, a clerk in the office recently deserted by Captain Erskine. To make no boast of his intimacy with the late Commissioner, would have been too much to exact

from the country doctor's philosophy; and he had, accordingly, the satisfaction of learning all that the malevolence of an often-reprimanded sub had been able to extract concerning the family, out of the inuendos of the Sunday papers.

What a triumph for the Toddles dynasty! What a delight to the doctor to be able to carry back such a budget of mischief to the White House! Such, then, was the infamous origin of the much-envied honours of the Erskine family! and what Apstonian, strong in the consciousness of impeccability, would have deigned to become distinguished at such a cost! Doctor Toddles declared that for *his* part, he had always suspected there was some ugly story at the root of their advancement. Virtue, if its own reward in this world, was a poor paymaster. It was only Vice that contrived to obtain thousands per cent. for its enormities,—as in the case of the Erskines.

He had better have held his peace, if, by tattling, he intended to effect further estrangement between Miss Lavinia and her cousin. So far from joining in the outcry

against "*the* Erskines," *she* was careful to distinguish between her injured kinsman and the low-born Apstonian who had brought this disgrace upon his name; and if, by some fortunate chance, he had addressed her at that moment with the slightest overtures toward reconciliation, it is more than probable the charitable institutions of the town would have been a hundred thousand pounds consols the loser. But Captain Erskine was as little aware of the slur inflicted on the good name of his wife, among his own people, as of the odium transferred from his own, and was never further from the intention of humbling himself in the sight of Apston and his cousin.

His thoughts were, in fact, becoming more and more perplexed between unceasing pleasure and growing embarrassments. The carriage and horses, with which he was no longer able to dispense; the dinner-parties he was now forced to give, in acknowledgment of the hospitalities of other people; dress, furniture, plate, subscriptions, and benefactions, in proportion to the rank he now held in society; all these, and hun-

dreds of unanticipated and uncitable expenses, caused him to exceed, by half, an income more than half bespoken.

Like all embarrassed men, he was often out of countenance ; and, like all men out of countenance, often out of temper. Towards Margaret, he had long been fractious and unjust. He even accused her, at times, of being a bad manager ; and assured her *he* knew families, who, with half their means, lived twice as well as they did.

To such remarks, Mrs. Erskine never hazarded a word in reply. She felt that she should degrade herself by attempting vindication from a charge so groundless as that of extravagance or bad housewifery. The only point on which she ever remonstrated, was his capriciousness with the children : encouraging them one day to sportive liberties, which the next he resented as an offence, according as he had been harassed by contrarieties in his affairs, or, as his poor wife fancied, according to his success at the gaming-table. But even in this she remonstrated without anger ; throwing *herself* silently in the way of his

reprimands, when she saw him arrive at home with a lowering brow, such as she fancied prognosticated harshness to her darlings.

It is true, compensation speedily followed his outbursts of temper. No man could look more ashamed of himself than he did, when his fit of irritability subsiding, he became doubly conscious of the meekness on which it had wreaked its vengeance. Sometimes he had hardly courage to face Georgiana Erskine; so confident was he that his wife *must* have confided to her his despotism and injustice. But he was mistaken. The contempt, not always very carefully repressed in the countenance of his cousin, arose solely from conviction of his instability of character and infirmity of principle, founded upon the regrets of Lord Baltimore.

Harassed by the idea of having a council of war sitting constantly upon his conduct by his own fireside, he made this an excuse to himself for absenting himself more systematically than ever. The evenings for which he had no engagement, he spent at his club, as became so good a whist-player, and, consequently, so popular a man. But

he was seldom *without* an engagement ; the claims of Windsor occupying at least three-fourths of his time.

Mrs. Erskine's little family consisted of three boys and three girls ; two of the former being at school, and their little brother, the youngest child and pet of the family. Lily was now fourteen ; fair as became her name, (*"più bianca di giglio !"*) and pure in nature as she was spotless of tint ; but Georgiana, who was a nice observer, noticed, as a peculiarity in a woman so gentle as Margaret, that, instead of fostering this excess of delicacy in her first-born, all the mother's efforts were directed towards fortifying her mind and imparting vigour to her character.

"Perhaps," thought Miss Erskine, "she is aware that, if more gifted with firmness, *she* might have obtained a stronger ascendancy over my cousin Alick, and preserved him, by her wiser influence, from the follies in which he indulges."

But no ! the motive lay deeper still, even beyond the reach of any but a mother's perspicuity, *not* of head but heart. All she de-

sired was, to form the character of the young girl so as to enable her to take her place in the family, in case she should be removed. She wanted to create in Lily a mother for her young ones; and took as much pains to initiate her into the foibles and infirmities of her little sisters, as though they were forthwith to be committed to her charge. She taught nothing to her eldest girl but what was strictly useful, and would qualify her to become the watchful mistress of a family. Helen and Georgy were encouraged to draw, to practise, to study their French and Italian. All she asked of Lily was to be a *woman*,—to be a woman before her time; to be a woman as quickly as she could. Perhaps because she felt her own time approaching for becoming an angel.

But all this was a subject of mortification to the father. In the eagerness of his newly-awakened ambitions, Captain Erskine was already beginning to form projects in favour of his pretty daughter. There was no reason she should not become one of the ornaments of the court; no reason

she should not form some noble alliance. He did not wish her to be brought up with these homely views, so unsuitable to the present condition of her family. "It was, doubtless, at Lord Baltimore's suggestion poor Lily was deprived of the advantage of becoming a musician. Lord Baltimore, perhaps, thought it a sin she should be taught to dance ; though Lady Carrolstown assured him, that his daughter was light as a sylph, and might be made one of the best pupils of Madame Michaud. There was really no occasion to have poor Lily reared like a sempstress."

Even this last unkindest cut of all, produced no rejoinder from Mrs. Erskine. So habitual was now her self-command, that she swallowed her tears in silence, merely replying that the world is full of casualties ; that "their sky might again be overcast ; and that she thought it prudent to rear one of the family with such a view to its future maintenance, as might excuse some indulgence of their weakness as regarded the rest. It should be as he pleased. If he wished Lily to cultivate her talents for

music, nothing could be easier. The time she now gave to teaching little Harry might be applied to the piano."

"I thought it was *you* who taught Harry?" cried Captain Erskine, abruptly. "I relied upon *you*. Alexander and Charles were considered very advanced, for their age, when they went to school. Charles had begun his Latin grammar when very little older than Harry. I should be sorry to have the poor little fellow, who has excellent abilities, potter away his time in the hands of a girl like Lily."

Careful not to reply that she was not now quite so strong as in the days when she was up and dressed at seven o'clock, to superintend the children's lessons; and that it was in order to devote her own time to the two younger girls, the little pet of the family was committed to the schooling of his sister; she satisfied him that he was mistaken in his date of Charles' Latin proficiency; and that, when the appointed time came, Harry would not be found more ignorant than his brothers. She did not venture to add that Lily was per-

fectly qualified to give the necessary instructions, lest, to his former taunt, he should be tempted to add, that he did not want his daughter to be brought up like a schoolmaster.

Meanwhile, there were other points in which the placeman and courtier chose Lily and his own vanity to be indulged. Horsemanship was becoming one of the characteristic accomplishments of the day ; and Captain Erskine was desirous she should ride, as well as the Lady Baltimores ; using the old argument, that “no woman could be a companion to her husband, in country life, which occupies eight months of the fashionable year, who is not a courageous horsewoman.” Margaret pleaded the expense, and was overruled.

“Wakehurst had just presented him with a capital lady’s horse, broke on purpose for Mrs. Wakehurst, who had been forbidden to ride by her physician ; and he would himself afford his daughter the necessary instructions.” And right proud was he of the admiration bestowed upon his lovely girl when she appeared with him, after a

few lessons, in the Park, well mounted and well dressed. Erskine, who had attained the age of thirty at the time of the battle of Waterloo and his own marriage, was now verging towards five-and-forty, with his hair a little frosted, and more than a few crow's feet puckering his care-worn face, felt that he brought forward some apology for looking old, in the person of this lovely daughter.

Poor Margaret now trembled indeed. How could she be assured that the society of the gay companions, who constantly joined her husband and daughter in their ride, would exercise no evil influence on the mind of Lily! They were most of them pleasant, lively, amusing people; men and women of the world; easier to talk to and listen to than such persons as Lord Baltimore and their cousin Georgiana. It was perhaps expecting too much from a girl of that age,—even reared so rigidly—as the child, old enough at quitting Apston to remember the bitter days of her youth, and profit by the remembrance,—to suppose that she would prefer the gravities

of her mother's fireside to the liveliness of those graceful flutterers of fashion.

Every day, when she saw poor Lily, in the joy of her youth and beauty, take her departure for the Park, by the side of the father at once so vain and proud of her, Margaret's heart ached again with its unavowed apprehensions ; and, on her daughter's return, would press her lips fervently to that fair forehead, as if expecting to find there some indication of the ordeal she had been passing, and the impression she had received.

"You look quite pale, Margy," said her husband one day, on finding her at the head of the stairs waiting to welcome them back. "I do believe you think I am not to be trusted with the care of this little puss ? But, I promise you, there is nothing to be afraid of. She has now as good a seat as any woman in England."

So little did he enter into the *real* nature of a mother's apprehensions ! Whatever her fault might be, Lily was to be trusted. But though incapable of being caught by mere glitter, or blinded by the flattering

attentions of a few ladyships and showy lords, to the flightiness of their manners and silliness of their conversation, as compared with the ladylike gentleness of her mother, it was impossible for a creature, in whose bosom the impulses of youth and health were thrilling unimpaired, not to be conscious of a relief from the habitual atmosphere of care and depression while enjoying the company of her father. Those rides in the Park were very pleasant to Lily. The paces of her pretty Arabian; the summer sunshine; the elastic turf; the aspect of cheerful faces; the enfranchisement from the school-room, combined to make her feel happier the moment she entered Stanhope Street gate, than she could almost forgive herself for feeling in the enjoyment of a pleasure unshared by her dear mother.

And Margaret discovered this on her return. In her candid face she read how happy the child had been; and was divided between the feeling of "Let her be happy while she can," and the wiser thought of "God forbid she should contract an appetite for a life of pleasure!"

The father, on the contrary, was inspired with new ambitions and fresh hopes, by witnessing the joy and triumph of his daughter. By degrees, those with whom they were mutually acquainted abroad found their way to the house. Men whom he had formerly received in his own room, for the discussion of dogs and horses, bets and cigars, new cabriolets and old hock, were now introduced into the drawing-room ; and Erskine found his home the pleasanter. The children, it is true, became strictly confined to the school-room ; and Lord Baltimore and Georgiana were no longer sure of the unmolested enjoyment of each other's society ; but the man of pleasure found himself more completely master in his own house.

The secluded life led by Mrs. Erskine, the quiet, gentle woman who received them all so calmly, and said so little to encourage their return, was pretty generally attributed, by his acquaintance, to ill-health. Her husband contented himself with the vague explanation, "that his wife was not fond of the world ;" and they were, of course, at

liberty to settle among themselves, some that she was serious, some that she was sickly, some that she was sulky. On one point were they unanimous:—that it was a thousand pities so good a fellow as Erskine should be so ill-matched in a wife.

A few — a few who fancied themselves more intimately his friends, such as Midge and Sir John Hall, (the sort of friends who had introduced him, the one to his banker, the other to his Jew,)—went farther:—the latter observing, that “Erskine, like many others, had thrown himself away in a bad match, before he knew what he was about;” the other whispering, with malice more intense, the name of “Baltimore!”—

No need, however, to waste time in discussing the pale, sullen woman, ensconced in the house in South Street, like a pearl in its shell. Even Erskine saw as little of her as he could. The world had become too pleasant a world to render the failure of pleasantness at home a paramount evil. There were races, and yachtings, and launches, and levées, and reviews. The Royal Cottage exhibited, within itself, a

microcosm of worldly pleasures. The joys of life were concentrated there as by enchantment; fair women, conversational men, music, flowers, new books, new instruments of all descriptions for the extirpation of time without pain. Captain Erskine abided there, like Aladdin in his palace, irresponsible and unharassed; pitying the ministers who brought down, once or twice a-week, their burthen of cares of state, which constituted only news to the inmates of the Cottage. The perplexities that rendered their heads so bald, and faces so sallow, were spared to the mere placeman. Risings in the North, fire raisings in the South, rebellion among the collieries, starvation in Ireland, bankruptcies in *The Gazette*, or death-warrants curdling the blood of some new-made sheriff,—exercised no control over his conscience!—

Lord Powderham led the life of a pack-horse, by comparison with *his* light-headed, light-handed service. *His* business was to bring the painted glasses in the magic lantern of life into a proper focus for the optics of royalty; his reward, to enjoy the best

entrées of the best cook in Europe, the best wines of the best cellar, the best jokes of the first wits, the best opinion of the first gentleman; the run of the royal stand at Ascot, the royal boxes at the theatres, the envy of his acquaintance, and an escape from the affections of a faultless wife and dutiful children. — What could a man wish more?

He wished, of course, (as human nature resident in May Fair and a frequent inmate of race-stands and opera-boxes is apt to wish,) for a few ready thousands for the payment of his debts, and a few more per annum to prevent the necessity of incurring more.

Such was the modest ratio fixed for the necessaries of polite life by the man to whom four hundred a-year had once constituted riches! He wished it, moreover, with anything but despair of its attainment. On the child of luck, thousands may devolve as easily as hundreds; and the thirty-thousand-pound prize is as attainable as one of five hundred. He heard constantly of fines falling in to the dignitaries of the

church and law, to the amount of tens of thousands; of perquisites of office, to an untold amount; of patronage in patent offices, which rendered his petty sinecure an atom of dust in the scale; and with an indefinite expectation of coming fortune engendered by a sanguineness of nature which the restraining influence of Margaret's good sense, or Baltimore's, or even Georgiana Erskine's, was no longer exercised to repress, the man who saw some new favour daily placed at the disposal of his royal master, conceived himself perpetually on the eve of being appointed governor of Barataria, or cacique of Poyais.

The golden shower evermore drizzling around him, might shed some imperceptible drops upon his head. The king, whose every word was a concession, and every smile a grace, might perpetuate his prosperity beyond the reach of change.

Meanwhile, a cloud was gathering in the horizon, that augured ill for those summer ephemera, and threatened the progressive prosperity of the favourite of fortune.

Sir John Erskine was found one day in-

sensible on the floor of his dressing-room ; and Alexander Charles, his nephew, baronetized in his stead ! So much the better. Sir Alexander Erskine carried higher authority with it, in the Red Book and list of royal hospitalities, than a simple Captainship ; and the new baronet felt all trace of his early ignominies effaced, by his change of name. His son would do better at Eton, as “ Mr. Erskine ;” and his daughter come out with more *éclat* when presented at court with “ her mother, Lady Erskine.”

But this was not the only point of view in which the event was fated to influence his destinies. Report soon whispered that “ his accession of honours was a barren one ; that, so far from estates descending to Sir Alexander, as had been predicted, his uncle had no estates to leave, and died insolvent.” The foolish old gentleman, trusting to the last to repair his fortunes by matrimony, in truth, left, for the support of his daughter, only a slender annuity ; the baronetcy he had solicited from government, purporting to form a screen to his poverty, rather than accredit the solidity of his fortunes.

The public was surprised and sorry; for the public had always settled Sir John Erskine to be a stingy old gentleman, with large colonial estates, the revenues of which he had not spirit to expend, and which would devolve with the title. But his nephew and sons-in-law knew so much better, that, instead of feeling disappointed at finding he had nothing to inherit, on arriving from Ireland to attend the funeral, Lord Carrolstown insisted upon carrying back Georgiana with him to Carrolstown Castle, till she found a more eligible home. He perfectly understood that at two-and-twenty, and all but portionless, she was in need of brotherly protection.

These events had passed so rapidly, that she was gone before Lord Baltimore heard any hint of her departure. Her absence, however, could not be long, since, in the course of a month or two, the family were to arrive in London for Lady Carrolstown's confinement; and in the interim, he trusted to come to such an understanding with his father, as would enable him to offer a permanent home to Georgiana. But, until as-

sured of Lord Powderham's assistance, he had courage to persevere in his silence.

But though unwilling to open his lips, it was no crime to open his ears; and aware that Miss Erskine corresponded with her cousin Margaret, there seldom passed a day but he found his way to South Street, to inquire what news from Carrolstown.

Perpetually, therefore, did Sir Alexander find him crossing his path. Four years before, he had come daily,—sometimes twice a-day,—and his visits had never seemed importunate.

Now, it only needed to render Erskine fractious for Midge to observe, “How heavy Balty's time must hang on his hands, for him to waste it so extravagantly on morning visits!”—He felt persuaded the tribunal had been sitting in judgment upon him;—and what business had his wife to entertain an understanding with any other man concerning the foibles of her husband?

He was, in fact, peculiarly prone, just then, to be peevish and impatient; for the supposition that he had inherited a fortune from

his uncle, brought his creditors upon his shoulders more importunately than usual. But that the Court was at Windsor, and likely to proceed to Brighton, Margaret would have had a bitter time of it.

Pretexts are seldom wanting for even the best of husbands to pick a quarrel with the best of wives. How much more in a case where the frailty of human nature had done so much to deteriorate the conjugal worth of the stronger party !

One day, towards the close of the year,—one of those cheerless London days when the atmosphere seems palpable, and only a few hours' daylight serves to divide one dreary night from another,—Lady Erskine, who had been spending the autumn in town with her children, from the difficulty of finding ready money for removing so large a family to the seaside, rose with more than the usual weight upon her spirits. Her husband being at Windsor,—Georgiana in Ireland,—Lord Baltimore with his family in Yorkshire,—she was thoroughly alone, to fight against the consciousness of increasing indisposition. She felt that she wanted country air. The skies

seemed to hang too heavy upon her. A few wanderings in the Bournefields would have done her more good, she thought, than a whole college of physicians.

While presiding in the school-room, and finding little Georgy harder to initiate into the mysteries of the irregular French verbs than she had ever found her before, Lady Erskine was agreeably surprised by a knock at the door; a well-known knock—Lord Baltimore's!

“I had not the least idea he was in town! How *glad* I am!” was her ejaculation, even before the servants came to announce his name. And the children, who saw her joyously lay down her book, avowed their curiosity, when she was gone, to know who could be the gentleman whose knock at the door was a signal of such joy to their mother.

All her spirits vanished, however, on re-joining their friend. Lord Baltimore seemed as much discomposed as she had ever seen her husband! After accepting the arm-chair she drew for him towards the fire, he seemed to be unconscious of what he was doing or saying. Though silent, his reverie was any-

thing but that of a mind at ease. Lady Erskine having replied satisfactorily to his first question concerning the health of Georgiana, he evidently considered it unnecessary to listen to anything further she might have to say.

At length, the train of his ideas came to a sudden check; and looking up, he saw the eyes of his companion fixed so wonderingly upon his face, as to rivet his looks in return upon her own.

“How ill you are looking!” cried he, with an abruptness quite on a par with his previous absence of mind. “Why on earth don’t you get out of town?”

“I cannot interrupt the children’s studies,” she replied, unable to tell the truth. “It would be a pity for Lily to lose her masters.”

“Masters? Stuff and nonsense! What are all the accomplishments on earth, compared with health, and health so precious as yours. For goodness’ sake let all the sonatas go to the devil, and hasten to Brighton or Hastings for a couple of months.”

“Not even for a couple of days!” replied

Lady Erskine, forcing a smile. "I agree with the song, and the Duke of Marlborough at Blenheim, 'Be it ever so humble, there's no place like *home*.' I am wedded to South Street."

"You are wedded to a man who don't take half the care of you he ought!" cried Baltimore, who was in the humour to find fault with everything and everybody. "I see how it is! I perfectly understand it all. You can't *afford* to go to Brighton. For want of a hundred pounds, you must submit to be pent up in this accursed town till you are in a low fever! Money again! always, always money at the root of every human misery."

"Do not expect to put me out of conceit with my looks, or my condition, or even with South Street!" exclaimed Margaret, trying to speak cheerfully. "London is one of the healthiest spots in the world. The children are all well."

"But *you* are not!" cried Lord Baltimore. "Don't contradict me; I shall not believe you the more for that. Miss Erskine assured me, before she left town, that though

you never complained, she was convinced you were often a sufferer. And this dull, lonely winter in town will quite knock you up."

"Believe me, you are both mistaken—" Margaret was beginning, with a faltering voice, when Lord Baltimore interrupted her.

"The worst of it is," cried he, "that I cannot propose the only alternative that suggests itself for your restoration to health, without taxing the pocket of Erskine, which I know to be just now badly furnished. I cannot say, as I used, 'Bring the children down with you to Baltimore Castle.' My father and mother are not there; and even if they were, I am on the worst possible terms with them."

"On bad terms with Lord and Lady Powderham?" exclaimed Margaret, much surprised.

"Yes! I doubt whether we shall ever speak again; the old story, as I said just now, *money*, is at the root of all human evil."

"But *you*, surely, have never been extravagant," inquired Lady Erskine, colouring.

"No! but *they* have; and *I* am to bear

the consequences ; bear it in the sacrifice of my dearest affections ; bear it in the person of the being I love most on earth.”

Satisfied that her friend Georgiana was alluded to, Lady Erskine became doubly attentive.

“ I need not tell you,” continued Lord Baltimore, “ that some years ago I relieved my father’s necessities, by enabling him to cut off the entail of a portion of his estates ; a portion sufficient, I thought, to place the whole family at ease. In return, I certainly felt justified in the hope that my father would enable me to marry, whenever I asked his leave to offer my hand to a person of suitable condition. Well, I was mistaken. I *have* asked it, I informed him yesterday of my desire to make proposals to Geor—to Miss Erskine.”

“ And he refused you ?”

“ His answer was tantamount to a refusal : that ‘ there wanted nothing more at this moment, to complete the ruin of my family.’ His affairs, it seems, (I speak to you, dearest Mrs. Erskine, as to a sister,) are in a most disordered state. Ever since Mary’s mar-

riage, my mother has been doing a thousand foolish things, in the hopes of obtaining equally good establishments for Elizabeth and Jane; while my father has so shackled himself by his improvements at the Castle, as to have little beyond his official salary at his disposal."

Lady Erskine could scarcely refrain from reiterating Lord Baltimore's former exclamation of " Money ! always, *always* money ! "

" In short," resumed her companion, " no sooner did I unfold my projects to him, than he replied by confidences of the most disagreeable nature. While *my* feelings have been absorbed by your and Erskine's difficulties, similar evils, it seems, have been overhanging my own family. My mother, in her old age, is likely to be exposed to sad reverses of fortune."

" I am truly sorry to hear it," said Lady Erskine, earnestly. " Heaven knows, you are entitled to the prayers of *my* family, that *yours* should be delivered from evil."

" Pray for *me*, my dear friend ! pray rather for *me* ! " said Lord Baltimore in a tone of irrepressible emotion : " for a more misera-

ble man than the one before you does not live. My father has used me ill, undeservedly ill. My father has thought proper to ascribe my choice to motives—my father has chosen to vilify—” he stopped short!—*Impossible* to state to a chaste and honourable wife, like Margaret, that Lord and Lady Powderham accused him of having been taken in to offer his hand to Georgiana, in order to redeem the forfeited character of Lady Erskine.

So thoroughly, indeed, did he appear overpowered by his feelings, that Margaret attempted to afford him some relief by observing, “I always *thought* you were attached to my cousin; I always *hoped* it! Even with the momentary difficulties of the case, I rejoice to learn your affection for poor Georgy, who, I am convinced, loves you in return. A deep-felt mutual attachment cannot but end happily at last.”

Lord Baltimore suddenly wheeled round his lounging-chair towards the sofa on which Margaret was seated. “You *really* think she loves me?” cried he, with all the eagerness of an honest heart. “No, no! you are

flattering me; you see how wretched I am to-day, and are willing to comfort me by a gleam of hope."

"I would not deceive you, even with so kind a purpose. I have often tried to extract from Georgiana an avowal of her sentiments concerning you."

"Miss Erskine has too much delicacy," interrupted Lord Baltimore, "to own herself attached to a man who has made her no declaration of his love."

"All I ever obtained in the way of confession," resumed Margaret, "was, that she admired and esteemed you beyond all other men. It is my own observation, of her cheerlessness when you quitted town; of her delight whenever I invited you to meet her here; of her utter indifference to the admiration of others; of her anxiety when you were ill, or long absent, or long silent; which convinces me that you engross every feeling of her heart."

As Georgiana was not present to be clasped to the heart of the happiest of men, Lord Baltimore contented himself with demonstrating his joy and gratitude, for all

this delightful intelligence, by seizing the hands of Lady Erskine, and pressing them to his lips; and, while still startled by his sudden movement, half-laughing and half-weeping, she was attempting to disentangle them from his grasp, her husband, who had walked up from the Treasury, after unexpectedly accompanying one of the cabinet ministers to town, suddenly stood before them.—Sir Alexander made his appearance quite as inopportunately as, on a former occasion, Mr. Private-secretary Midge! —

Impossible to look more guilty than the couple surprised in so affectionate a *tête-à-tête*, or more infuriated than Sir Alexander. His face was livid with rage. His voice trembled with passion. There was nothing, at the moment of his arrival, (Lady Erskine having already withdrawn her hands,) to justify any extreme measure of resentment. But the confusion of the parties was not to be overlooked; and, instead of addressing them with the customary civilities of greeting, Erskine banged to the ground with violence, a chair he had seized on his entrance, perhaps with a view of knocking

Lord Baltimore down,—perhaps, only with the intention of seating himself.

“Has anything happened to annoy you?” was the simple apostrophe of Margaret,—far from surmising the truth, and absorbed, at that moment, in the idea of the consolation awaiting her friend Georgiana.

“*Happened!*” exclaimed her husband. “What *should* happen?—Only that I have had a damned cold drive, (it is freezing hard in the country;) and that you and Baltimore seemed so engrossed by the interest of your conversation, as to forget to ring for coals.—The fire is almost out.”

And he rang the bell with a degree of violence that nearly broke the spring, and brought the servant hurrying up stairs, as if he expected to find one or more of the party in peril of their lives.

“Coals!”—cried he in a voice that might have given the word of command to a regiment, or a man-of-war. And Lord Baltimore, unable to surmise himself an object of jealousy in the house of his friends, and attributing the extraordinary conduct of Erskine to momentary excitation, arising,

probably, from the insolence of some dun, waited quietly for him to get cool again, and afford them an explanation.

“You must have been surprised to find me here,” said he, at length, addressing Sir Alexander, on finding silent sulkiness succeed to rage. “I only came to town half an hour ago.”

“*Surprised?* not in the least. I heard from the children you were here; that is, I concluded it to be you, from their account of Lady Erskine’s exclamations on hearing your knock.”

“You have been into the school-room, then?” inquired Margaret, a little surprised. But her husband deigned not the smallest reply; a rudeness which served to increase the embarrassment of Lord Baltimore.

“I am afraid I *have* a sad postman’s knock,” said he. “My mother and Mary Greatoux often upbraid me with my want of skill. Let us hope that, in these days of improvement, door-knockers will soon be altogether abolished.”

Conceiving, from the obstinate silence maintained by Sir Alexander, that he might wish to be alone with his wife for some

explanation regarding their family-affairs, Lord Baltimore, thoroughly uncomfortable, rose to take leave.

“ Shall I see you again before I leave town ? ” said he, quietly addressing Margaret. “ I am off for Wales to-morrow night.”

“ On your way to Ireland ? ” inquired Lady Erskine, with a smile whose significance tended still further to exasperate the suppressed fury of her husband.

“ No such good luck,” was the mysterious reply. “ But in case I don’t find you at home to-morrow morning, God bless you ! and as I said just now, remember me in your prayers. Good bye, Erskine,” added he, on reaching the door, without having extended his hand to the angry man, who was standing on the hearth-rug with his hands behind him, by way of facilitating his restoration to coolness.

Lady Erskine had already rung the bell, somewhat more moderately than her husband, that the servants might be in attendance on their guest ; and in another moment the door closed on him, and the husband and wife were left alone.

“ How long has that man been here ? ”

was Erskine's frantic inquiry, fixing his flaming eyes upon Margaret.

"I can scarcely say. Did not the children tell you?" replied the astonished Lady Erskine. And the remark was instantly construed by the angry man into a taunt.

"No; they told me nothing but your exclamation of joy on his arrival," replied he, becoming more and more excited. "It *ought* not to have surprised me; though, I own, I am amazed you *could* not command yourself better in their presence, poor innocent little creatures! But I might have expected it all. I had been warned—I—"

He could not complete his sentence. The once mild and gentlemanly Erskine was literally choking with rage. Still, Margaret did not in the smallest degree conjecture the origin of his excitement. She feared he had met with some insult. She scarcely knew what she feared. There was perhaps some disagreement between him and Lord Baltimore, rendering it painful to them to meet.

"Lord Baltimore has been making a sad explanation to me," said she, by way of deprecating his animosity. "It appears that

he—” She stopped short. It suddenly occurred to her, that his avowal of affection for Georgiana had rather escaped his lips, than been confided ; and that it might not suit him to have it communicated to the nearest kinsman of Miss Erskine. The confusion overspreading her countenance, at the idea of her own indiscretion, was apparently that of a guilty conscience.

“ Well, Madam ? ” said he, intently regarding her, and trembling from head to foot. “ It appears you say, that he—”

“ It appears that the affairs of Lord Powderham are nearly as embarrassed as our own ! ” — pursued Lady Erskine, agitated in her turn, at this strange apostrophe. “ And that he has actually announced to his son, the impending ruin of his family ! ”

“ And may I inquire Lord Baltimore’s motive for making this very confidential disclosure to yourself ? ” cried Erskine, in the same passionate tone.

“ Probably, because he felt himself entitled to the sympathy of those so deeply obliged to him.”

“ I understand you,” cried her husband.

“ You wish to recall to my mind what, God knows, I am little likely to forget,—that I am a debtor to this man,—that I owe him money—money I am unable to pay !”—

Lady Erskine turned pale as death. Till that moment, she entertained no suspicion that her husband had incurred pecuniary obligations to their benefactor. She did not know that Baltimore, feeling himself in some degree responsible for the follies committed by Erskine in the sphere into which he had been the means of transporting him, had more than once volunteered relief from urgent claims made on the improvident man.

“ But do not suppose I have one moment forgotten my miserable obligations !”—persisted the infuriated husband, misinterpreting her change of countenance. . “ They add too bitterly to my humiliation as well as to the guilt of his conduct, in availing himself of his superiority over me to disgrace my unhappy name and deprive me of the affections of my wife !”—

Margaret was aghast. She fancied,—she *trusted*—that her ears deceived her. But the madman did not long leave her in doubt.

“For months past,” said he, incoherently, “have the hints of officious friends apprised me of all that was going on here.—For months past, Madam, have I been watching your proceedings.—I could not bring myself at once to believe that you,—you of whom I thought so highly,—you, for whom I sacrificed all my worldly prospects, and would have sacrificed my existence,—you, whom I raised into my bosom from a life of drudgery to the condition of a gentlewoman,—you, whose low birth will one day be a stigma upon your children, as it has long been a drawback to my own advancement,—I could not bring myself *at once*, I say, to believe you capable of such black ingratitude. But now, my own eyes have convinced me of the terms of indecent familiarity existing between you and the man I will no longer call my friend.—I can no longer doubt that—”

He paused, and flew towards Lady Erskine’s chair.—Before he reached it, Margaret, cold and senseless as a stone, had sunk from her seat upon the floor!—

PART VII.

IN a moment, servants were despatched for the medical attendant of the family ; and, to do justice to Sir Alexander Erskine, the sight of Margaret, pale and senseless before him, even though he still believed her guilty, cut him to the soul.

He had never thought her utterly lost ;—only estranged from him in affection, and weakened in principle. Now that he beheld her as one dead, even *this* surmise was forgotten.—He saw in her once more the faithful wife of his youth !—

It was some time before she was restored to herself. When she *did* recover her consciousness, her husband wisely judged it better she should find herself with Lily and the servants. But on quitting the room with the medical man, the communication

made to him was not of a nature to reassure his feelings.

“Has anything occurred to Lady Erskine, Sir, may I ask, to produce this nervous crisis?”—said Dr. Wilson; “or am I to suppose it merely symptomatic?”

“I—I fancy she has been a *little* flurried this morning,” replied Erskine, fancying that perfect sincerity might be essential to the mode of treatment of the invalid.

“I am almost glad to hear it,” replied the Doctor; “for I have long been uneasy on Lady Erskine’s account. You must have perceived, like myself, a great change in her?”

“I have certainly seen her *low* at times:—the result, perhaps, of family cares. The children are occasionally too much for her!”

“It is true there are few such mothers and nurses as Lady Erskine!—But the change to which I allude has, I fear, some more serious origin. When the boys had the measles last winter, and little Harry was so slow in his recovery, I was here, as you may remember, daily; that is, as you do *not* remember,—for you were on

duty at Windsor. But I recollect saying to Lady Erskine, when she followed me to the door to ask my opinion of the child, (then on the eve of convalescence,) that I wished I thought *her* half as well. She tried to laugh off the charge of indisposition.—But we doctors are on the alert in such matters; and I had not been shaking hands with her twice a-day for three weeks, without discovering that her strength was consuming under a low fever.—I could not persist, when she stated herself to be ‘*well*—*quite* well,’ only a little fatigued by nursing and anxiety. I should have appeared,” added Dr. Wilson, with a smile, “to be fishing for a job! But I did not the less perceive, with regret, that something was amiss; and have never seen her ladyship since, without being confirmed in my opinion. At present, I can give you no insight into the cause of all this. But we must watch carefully over her, Sir Alexander. I say *we*;—for, to a woman like Lady Erskine, the care and tenderness of her family are of more account than the skill of the physician.”

This hint arose from the private observation of a man familiar with the ways of South Street, that Margaret was left too much alone,—that Margaret was the burden-bearer of the house.—It served however, to increase the self-accusations of her husband; who felt, that he had acted in an unmanly manner, by letting fall upon his wife the displeasure he had concealed from her partner in error.

Harassed and perplexed, it was not till just before dinner,—not till the candles were lighted,—that he ventured into Margaret's room. She was up; she had refused to remain in bed; but was lying on her sofa, with a face as white as alabaster, and eyes still glassy from the effects of recent insensibility. Writing materials were scattered on a table near the sofa, and an open note was in her hand, as if she were expecting his arrival.

“Do me the favour to read and send that!” said she, extending it towards her husband instead of replying to his inquiries; and without noticing the superscription, he cast his eyes over the following lines:—

“DEAR LORD BALTIMORE,

Have I your permission to repeat to my husband the *whole* of our conversation this morning?—Truly yours,

M. E.”

And though, after the perusal, he entreated her to banish the subject from her mind, and dissuaded her from sending the letter, she persisted so earnestly, that, five minutes afterwards, it was on its way to White’s, where Baltimore had mentioned that he was to dine.

Long indeed appeared the interval, till the servant brought back the answer:—

“Every syllable, if you please, dear Lady Erskine;” wrote Lord Baltimore in reply. “As the nearest male relative of the woman who has long possessed my heart, and to whom, I hope, I may yet be enabled to offer my hand, Erskine is entitled to the confidence. But his uncourteous manner of accosting me to-day, rendered all communication impossible. I shall not see you to-morrow, as I leave town earlier than I expected. Let me, therefore, take this

opportunity of begging you to say for me, in your next letter to Georgiana, all that *can* be said compatibly with the unfortunate position of

Your sincere friend, BALTIMORE."

Before this letter arrived, Sir Alexander had been obliged to proceed to a formal dinner-party at the house of the Master of the Horse. On his return home at an early hour of the evening, he found it unopened on his table, enclosed in a blank cover, and addressed to him by his wife.

Heartstruck and ashamed at so complete a refutation of his calumny, he longed to rush into her presence, and on his knees implore forgiveness. But before he had been many minutes in the house, the nurse who had attended his children ever since their establishment in town, made her appearance, to acquaint him that Lady Erskine had undergone another severe attack ; that Dr. Wilson had been called in, had prescribed an opiate, and issued strict orders that she should not be disturbed.

"Her room was closed ; only Miss Lily

was there, watching by her mamma, who was asleep."

That was a very long night to the conscience-stricken Erskine! — overwhelmed with compunction for his cruel injustice towards the best wife and best friend ever vouchsafed by the bounty of Providence. So dense, too, as well as graceless, as he had shown himself in the matter! — For what more probable than an attachment between persons so well assorted as Baltimore and Georgiana? — In spite of the asseverations of the former that he should never marry, what more evident to any man in his senses, than the attraction which brought these two people, day after day, to the hum-drum house which even he, though it contained the family he loved, voted the dullest in London?"

"He was an ass, he admitted that he was an ass!" He had not yet wisdom to discover that he was something infinitely worse.

Georgiana's prospects afforded him some solace. He forgot the bitter things he had said to his wife, and the monstrous cruelty

with which he had repaid her years of love and submission, while reflecting that, among the growing honours of his family, would be that of saluting his fair cousin as "Countess of Powderham !" For the marriage would certainly take place. The Earl was infirm and tottering in his place ; and Baltimore the very man to maintain his affections unchanged to the end of a hundred years.

"It will be an excellent thing for my girls !" pondered the now worldly man. "Lady Carrolstown is not in a good set, and Mrs. Wakehurst a vulgar woman. When Lily comes out, she could not have a better chaperon than such a cousin as Lady Powderham, who will take an excellent place in the world, and has tact enough to maintain it."

Instead of giving way to such fears as *ought* to have been suggested by the remarks of the family physician on Margaret's state of health, he was devising means for superseding her in the public charge of her daughters !

Still, the better principle was not so utterly extinguished, but that eventually he

recurred to the sufferings he had occasioned.

“Poor thing! she has taken it all too much to heart,” thought he. “Margaret used to have more sense; Margaret used to have higher courage. How she used to work at Apston, and without a murmur! Now, the least thing annoys her, and she is nervous as a fine lady.—Poor Margy! I was wrong to be so hasty; but appearances were strangely against them.—Even now, I think Baltimore was to blame, (so intimately as we have lived together,) not to have been more explicit with *me* on the subject of Georgiana.—But, in their love affairs, men are strangely punctilious. I am glad he leaves town to-morrow; for it would have been disagreeable to meet him, after the scene of this morning!—I scarcely know how I shall ever face poor Margy, particularly as Wilson is of opinion that she must be kept so quiet. I will write a few lines, to be given to her when she wakes in the morning; and then, unless she provoke further explanations, let the matter rest.”

He wrote, therefore, a kind note, return-

ing her the explanation of Lord Baltimore, and entreating her forgiveness. And thus, these two persons, who had once existed but in each other's presence,—felt with one heart, thought with one mind,—breathed only a commingled breath,—were reduced, by the evil influences of social life, to communicate with each other, though abiding under the same roof—by letter !

Next morning, the offender rose with the feelings of a man who has had a bad fall in hunting the preceding day. Before he was quite dressed, Midge was announced ; and on proceeding to the breakfast-table he had expected to find solitary, not only the Secretary, but his friend Sir John Hall was awaiting him.

“ I have brought you good news,” cried the former. “ I mentioned to Lord Powderham, some days ago, that it was an object to you to get into parliament ; and there appears every probability that government will have a seat at its disposal very shortly. The old Duke of Shrapnel is at his last gasp ; and Hexington will fall in to us, when Lord Holles goes to the Upper House.”

“ Lord Powderham is disposed, then, to accept my services? ”

“ Of course he is !—You are the man we want !—*We* shall be pleased, *you* will be pleased, and the king will be pleased ; who, from so dutiful a subject as myself, ought, perhaps, to have obtained precedence.”

“ What the deuce ! Is Erskine going to be sent to the galleys? ” cried Sir John Hall, throwing down the Morning Post.

“ He is going to take sanctuary ! ” said the Secretary, maliciously. “ You and Henry Greatoux knocked him up between you last Ascot.—Didn’t they, Erskine ? ”—

“ Why, surely *you* had not a heavy book at Ascot ? ” inquired Sir John, unable to conceive that the loss of hundreds might produce to another man the same inconvenience as, to himself, the loss of thousands.

“ Not I ! a mere trifle,” cried Erskine ; not wishing to render the schedule of his private affairs the property of the clubs. But Midge chose to persevere.

“ Were I in your place, Erskine, lucky dog as you are,” said he, “ instead of seeking security under the buff coat of the Com-

mons, I should make a bold stroke at once for a suit of Milan steel among the Lords. —Why not spell for a peerage? They say there is no one to whom the king is more partial than yourself.”

“What have I done to deserve it? —What pretext is there for such a distinction?”—

“Who talks, now-a-days about deserts or pretexts?” cried the Secretary. “Irish peerages, which were given in George the Third’s time to those who asked for the key of the Birdcage Walk, (as the lesser favour of the two,) have now fallen still lower in the market. Do you remember the reason assigned by Louis the Thirteenth for bestowing a *brevet de Duc* on the father of the famous St. Simon?”

Neither Hall nor Erskine had ever heard of any “famous St. Simon,” but the author of St. Simonianism.

“Because,” said Midge, with a significant smile,—“‘our trusty and well-beloved St. Simon knows a good horse when he sees it, and does not slaver the *cor de chasse* out hunting, before he passes it on.’”

“Erskine don’t slabber his key-bugle, then?”—cried Sir John Hall, with an uproarious laugh. “We’ll try you, my boy, the first time I take out my drag; and recommend you to his majesty’s ministers, according to the result, to be made Lord Drybib.”

“I have neither pretension nor fortune to be made a peer,” said Sir Alexander, a little annoyed.

“My dear fellow, such honours are conceded, now-a-days, to cover a *want* of fortune. An Irish coronet is stamped on a man like the ‘free’ upon a frank!” said the saucy Secretary.

“For my part, I know nothing more pitiable than a poor peer,” observed Erskine, shrugging his shoulders.

“I do,—a poor baronet,” retorted Sir John Hall. “I’m sure I wish government would entitle me to call myself Lord Vaux Hall, or Lord anything else, as a reward for my knowledge of horseflesh; (the only knowledge I have, and I’m thankful to Dodo for showing me a way of turning it to account). The poorest possible peer has his

privilege ; and who ever heard of a lord in a workhouse, where I am likely to find myself, if the next Derby plays me as false as the last.—But you've done breakfast, Erskine. Come down with us to Tattersall's. We're walking. 'Tis only a step across the Park ; and this cursed frost, which keeps one away from Melton, at least makes London supportable.”—

“What are you going to do at Tattersall's?”—inquired Erskine, unwilling to go out so early.

“Read with your eyes, if you can possibly have avoided hearing with your ears, that Rayland's horses are to be sold to day !” cried Sir John, pushing *The Morning Post* towards him. “The second column, and stretching half down half the paper,—‘CAPITAL SEASONED HUNTERS.’ All London was there yesterday, at the view, and I among the rest. No chance of Crusader, however. Henry Greatoux means to go a devil of a price for him. But I don't much mind. Crusader is hardly up to my weight ; and there is a brown horse, half-brother to Gustavus, that would be the very thing for me.”

“What ! the horse Rayland rode last year with the stag-hounds ?”—inquired Sir Alexander, with some interest, for he knew that the Master of the Buckhounds had made an unsuccessful offer for the horse, for the royal stud.

“Precisely !—the greatest beauty without paint, I ever set eyes on.”

Already, Sir Alexander had rung for his great coat, with the intention of accompanying his friends ; contenting himself with sending up a message of inquiry to Margaret, (to whom, two hours before, he had despatched his contrite note of explanation,) begging to know how she had rested.

The answer was brought by Lily, just as her father was leaving the house : “Mamma was better,—mamma thanked him for his letter.”

The little girl had hurried down, breathless, with the express intention of adding, at her own suggestion, “Surely you will not go out without seeing her ? I fear she is not so well as she thinks herself.”

But on finding him in company with Mr. Midge and Sir John Hall, both of whom

were laughing immoderately as they passed through the hall at some coarse joke of the latter, she felt a modest repugnance, young as she was, at mentioning her mother and her mother's illness in their presence.

A few hurried words of satisfaction, therefore, accompanied the kiss which Erskine hastily imprinted on his daughter's forehead, and the street-door closed after them, and they were gone ;—gone, to play their part in that world of materialists, whose lives glitter with the semblance of brilliancy, like the diamond-cut mock jewel, which owes its colour to a little tinsel at the bottom.

And right joyously they played it!—It was a sunshiny, frosty day ; and the noisy idlers among whom they found themselves dispersed, were high in the sort of buoyant spirits generated by a crowd. It was not often so fine a stud was brought to the hammer as that of their friend Rayland, who was ruined and gone abroad ; and they were fighting a good fight in the division of the spoil. — From Tattersall's, the knowing-in-horse-flesh proceeded to St. James's Street ; —some to refresh with a hot jelly, a glass

of liqueur, or a *riz à la Turque*, after lounging in the cold;—some to attack the newspapers, in search of food for their empty minds.

London was full for the season. A week's frost had brought up the Meltonians; and the opera and parliament, (to borrow their own order of classification,) were about to commence operations. For both, a brilliant session was anticipated; and the triflers of that day, who included politics among their trivialities, were on the *qui vive*. Elation of spirits is usually contagious. The new baronet found it difficult to harp upon his domestic grievances, or retain vexatious recollections, where all were so full of confidence and hope. He heard mention only of what was pleasant and profitable; new measures to be carried, new proselytes for the ministry, new improvements for the metropolis, new furniture for the new palace, new favourites for the Derby,—new patents, new prospects, new triumphs for the king and country;—and the soul within him was glad: for he felt that he and his had a portion in these things.

His affairs *must* come round. Scarcely a man with whom he was associating, but was far deeper “dipped” than himself; and *they* did not think it necessary to array themselves in sackcloth and ashes, because certain scrubby individuals, called tradesmen, were entitled to say to each of them, without touching their hats, “Pay me that thou owest!”

Before Sir Alexander Erskine quitted ——’s he was engaged to dine there with a party who had an order for the royal box at Covent Garden; the triumphs of Fanny Kemble rendering it rather less vulgar than usual to be seen at the play. It was a comfort, therefore, to hear from the nurse, on his return home, that “Lady Erskine was much better, but dozing, from the effect of the opiate the night before;” and, after admonishing Lily to take care of her mother, and send for Dr. Wilson in case of any return of indisposition, away he went again, relieved from the embarrassment of an interview.—At this rate, all unpleasant recollections would be effaced before they met again.

On *his* part, no means were left untried to efface them from his recollection. One of Ude's *diners des plus succulens*, with plenty of Léoville and dry champagne to enliven the wits of two or three of the pleasantest men in London, served as an agreeable prelude to a well-acted play, one of the last coruscations of the expiring English drama. It is true they only arrived at the theatre in time to hear Charles Kemble exclaim that "Fathers have flinty hearts, no tears can move them," after rescuing his daughter from the tomb of all the Capulets in the last scene of "Romeo and Juliet." But a capital pantomime followed; and "Puss in Boots" served *them* to laugh at, quite as well as Mercutio. They went home exhausted by their uproarious mirth at the drolleries of the best of clowns; and next day, the papers only announced that "among the distinguished visitors to Covent Garden Theatre, last night, to witness the performance of Miss Kemble, were the Duke of Sweepstakes, the Earls of Spadeshill and Grabinton, Lord Henry Greatoux and Sir Alexander Erskine;" — an additional evidence,

if any were wanting, of the patronage bestowed by the nobility of these realms upon the patent theatres and the national theatres. “Vivat Rex” and Shakspeare for ever !

On his return home, after a cigar and its concomitants with Lord Henry, Erskine felt a little nervous when his pass-key grated in the door. He could not altogether forget the observations made the preceding day by Dr. Wilson. Then came the consoling reflection that, “ignorant of the moral cause of Margy’s fainting fit, the deluded Doctor made the most of a temporary indisposition.” But having noticed as he approached the house, a dim light through the cracks of the window-shutters in Lady Erskine’s room, he ventured a low tap at her door, with the intention of inquiring after her ; and receiving no answer, cautiously turned the handle and went in. All was still ; and by the glimmering of the fire, he perceived poor Lily seated in the great arm-chair beside her mother’s bed. Sleep had overtaken the weary child in her watch.

Erskine advanced on tiptoes ; and having

slightly drawn aside the bed-curtains, and ascertained that the invalid was also reposing, resolved to wake his daughter and enjoin her to retire to her bed in the adjoining dressing-room, while he assumed her post. But as he was on the point of touching her arm, a gleam of firelight fell upon her fair face, paler than even her white night-dress; showing her so pure, so young, so lovely, so much resembling his Margaret of other days, that tears came into his eyes.

By some strange influence upon his feelings, he had not courage to wake her; or to separate the mother and child so worthy of each other. If the truth were told, he felt that, after the evening he had been spending, *he* was not quite worthy to tread the hallowed ground on which he was standing.

Once in his own room, again, however, where a lamp was left for him by the servant, the spell was broken. The world came back upon him, and Erskine was himself again; more especially when he saw lying on his table, a letter in Midge's hand-

writing, signed by Lord Powderham, and headed, "Private and confidential;" while the cover (for the instruction of that wingless Mercury, a Treasury messenger) was superscribed, "With haste."

"MY DEAR SIR,—(ran section one of the ministerial missive,)—"You will do me a favour by calling on me to-morrow as early as possible, having business of moment on which to confer with you.

Ever, my dear Sir,

Your obedient Servant,

POWDERHAM."

Section the second added, more circumstantially, "Old Shrap. is off! We have lost a paralytic Duke and gained a close borough. I shall be at the shop by ten; and have a thousand things to talk over with you, preparatory to your audience of the Pacha.—Yours *à la vie et à la mort*, A.M.": to which secretarial appendix was added, in Dodo's loosest handwriting, "a deal more private and confidential than t'other."

Sir Alexander rubbed his hands exultingly, as he laid down the letter co-partite. The death of the Duke of Shrapnel was indeed a lucky event. His Grace could not have died more opportunely; though it may be observed *en passant*, that men whose deaths make way for the advancement of their fellow-creatures, may choose their own day, for they seldom die *mal à propos*.

But while Erskine, in the height of his self-gratulation, was hurrying to bed that he might be astir betimes for the business of an important morrow, his eye fell upon two other letters, one of which he placed unopened in his writing drawer,—the clerkly address, cotton paper, and red wafer, foretelling the nature of a tragic folio, terminating with the usual hint respecting “immediate attention;” — whereas the other, from the oddity of its form, and clumsiness of its folding, attracted the immediate attention vainly solicited by its rival. Nor did the ill-spelt address, to “Sir Alixander Ereskine, Esq., Bart.,” diminish his curiosity. —The epistle was evidently from a stable

correspondent ; for it smelt powerfully of the *Mews*.

An exclamation very different in tone from that which had hailed the decease of the Duke of Shrapnel, escaped him after perusal. A low scamp, on whom he remembered having bestowed a gratuity in the course of some horse-dealing transaction, appealed, on the present occasion to his honour's generosity, for giving him the earliest warning that a writ had been taken out against him by a notorious bill-discounter, with whom he was at issue concerning usurious per-centage.

“I was not far wrong in saying that the Duke of Shrapnel died just in time !” — said he, thrusting the unsavoury missive into the fire still smouldering in the grate, and taking care that no portion of it should remain extant to edify the housemaid. For so much reason had he to feel alarmed at the information he had received, that, instead of waiting to obtain intelligence concerning his wife, he hurried off at once to Midge's lodgings in Pall Mall ; and after breakfasting with him and arranging the

preliminaries of his conference at the Treasury, found he could not do better than proceed straight to Hexington after his audience with the Earl. A privy-council had sat the preceding day. The new writ was already issued.

How to describe the feelings of poor Margaret during that weary interval ! Her own presentiments, and the observations of Dr. Wilson, were not deceptions. Long afflicted with physical ailment, she was unprepared to meet the blow so wantonly dealt by the hand that should have been evermore outstretched to succour her. At first, indeed, she had been providentially stunned by its cruel violence. It was only during the leisure of her bed of weakness she was able fully to comprehend the injury she had received.

Accused of unchastity ! Suspected of everything that is heinous in woman's nature :—coldly suspected,—deliberately watched ! Her life of humble seclusion attributed to the self-suffering indulgence of illicit love ! She, whose eye had never strayed from her husband and children, unless when raised

in patient gratitude to Heaven!—Was it for this she had lived—was it for this she had struggled,—was it for this she had resigned herself? Deeply had she ever recognised her husband's sacrifices in her favour; and deferentially regarded his superiority of birth and education. But now, these feelings of veneration were converted into bitterness by the avowal of his long-smothered contempt. *He* had been feeling the extent of his sacrifices all this time, even more deeply than herself!

Margaret Erskine was undergoing, in short, one of those agonizing crises produced by the worthlessness of a beloved object; one of those moments in which nothing seems true, or good, or just in human nature; when dismay and disappointment render us alternately eager to search into the motives of the world, and to shrink with terror from the investigation. Terror was in her heart, confusion in her mind. There, where she had trusted so largely, had she been deceived; there, where she had loved so fondly, had she been an object of disgust. The truth was now re-

vealed. Prosperity had usurped her place in the heart of her husband!—

She was gradually attaining the usual desperate exclamation of the heartbroken, “Then what have I left to live for!” when a little hand was gently placed within her own, and a fond kiss imprinted upon her cheek by the warm lips of her youngest born. Lily, who, while watching by the bedside of her mother during that night of misery, noted with silent grief her restlessness, her suppressed sobs and unsuppressible sighs,—had hastened, at daybreak, (taught by the precious instincts engendered by such an education of the heart as adversity bestows,) to fetch the children for her consolation. The girls were already by her bedside,—little Harry in her arms;—and with the soft face of Lily bending over her own, it was impossible for Margaret to repeat the sinful exclamation of, “What have I now to live for!”

The tears wept over those beloved heads afforded greater relief to the invalid than all the prescriptions of the physician. Gathering strength from the contact of her

children, she rallied her courage sufficiently to assure poor Lily that “she felt much better, and would try to rise.”—She tried, and *could* not!—The spirit was willing, but the flesh was weak. Nevertheless, Dr. Wilson, finding, on his arrival, her fever abated and her pulse more calm, pronounced that his patient was improving.

“I shall be better to-morrow, dearest,” whispered she, to her kind little daughter; and conscientiously could she promise it, for she was *determined* to be better. Her hands were as full of duties, as her heart of resignation. She knew that she *must* not faint by the way.

There was every encouragement for her convalescence. A kind note from her husband apprised her of his departure for Hexington under an urgent necessity for haste. Nor must she longer delay writing to Georgiana, according to her promise to Lord Baltimore; and it was so pleasant a task to say,—“You are loved by him you love, and who is so deserving of your love. Nothing prevents him from telling you this in person but the disorder of his

father's affairs. This cannot last for ever. Fear nothing ! All will end as you desire."

The letter despatched, her heart felt more at ease. For though she would not have had Miss Erskine suspect the wrongs to which Lord Baltimore's passion had exposed her, Margaret felt that it doubled her claims to the good offices of her friend. She, too, was looking forward for her children; but with views how different from those entertained by her husband ! *He* wanted to secure the notice of the Countess of Powderham for his daughters; she, the counsels of the excellent Georgiana.

On the return of the truant to town, some days afterwards, as Sir Alexander Erskine, Bart., M.P., he was shocked to perceive the ravages wrought in her appearance by the lapse of a week.—She was no longer the same woman.—Spiritless and emaciated, the ghastly smile with which she assured him she was quite well again, and should soon be strong as ever, filled him with consternation !

With all the inconsistency of his pre-

sent modes of thought and action, he began to accuse Lily of not having taken sufficient care of her mother ; the children of having overtasked her ; the old nurse of suffering her to exhaust herself. He even decided that Dr. Wilson was an old woman, and proposed to call in a consulting physician. But Margaret, annoyed by the blame attached to those so faultless as regarded her, exerted herself to appear better, or she was touched and excited by kindness so unusual on the part of her husband ; for the day after his return she made her appearance in the drawing-room, looking nearly as well as usual. Midge, who had business with the new member, noticed to Sir Alexander, when they left the house together to go through certain official forms at the Treasury, that he had never seen Lady Erskine more charming. The soft lace cap and white wrapping-gown in which Lily had attired her mother, became her more than her usual austere simplicity of dress.

Only too glad to be relieved from his fears, Sir Alexander was content to accept

any demonstration of amendment. Without inquiring very curiously into the state of the pulse, or rest, or appetite of the patient, it sufficed him that she was in her place again, which entitled him to resume the duties of his own. He was just then in great force. The announcement of his name in the Gazette, as a "member returned to serve in this present parliament," placed him perfectly at ease. Between two such safeguards as the royal household and imperial senate, he might laugh the world to scorn.

As he walked down St. James's Street with Midge, the hilarity of his spirits brightening his countenance, exchanging nods with the club windows, and a friendly word with almost every man they met whose friendship was worth cultivating, those familiar faces smiled their congratulations to him upon the news communicated by the morning papers. Every nod purported to say—"How are you, Erskine? I wish you joy of getting into parliament!" And all the joy they wished him, seemed really expanding in his heart.

“I am sorry Lord Powderham is gone down to Baltimore Castle,” said he to Midge as they passed the end of the street containing Powderham House. “I should like to have seen and thanked him. I believe, however, the king spoke to him about me. All this has probably been an act of kindness suggested by the king, — ever thoughtful and generous ! Still, my obligations to Lord Powderham ought to be acknowledged.”

“If you mean to acknowledge them by trying to give him pleasure,” said Midge, drily, “between ourselves, the less you show your face in his house the better.”

“Show my face in his house ! What do you mean, my dear fellow ?” cried Erskine, in some amazement.

“Ay, what *do* I mean ? I wish to heaven you would tell me ; for I am as much puzzled as *you* can be. All I know is, that you are in very bad odour just now in the high and puissant house of Baltimore ; but I can tell you nothing wherefore.”

“Some ministerial caprice, I suppose !”

“Pardon me ! My noble master is much

too heavy a fellow to be capricious ! The Pacha is as steady as time, and almost as tedious. If he have taken a dislike to you, depend upon it, it is on what he calls good and sufficient grounds ; and there will be no repeal of the statute without an act of parliament, or some such lumbering process."

"A dislike to *me*?"—reiterated Erskine, who had been long enough a royal favourite not to feel assured this was impossible.

"I owe it to you to be frank, as the judge says to the prisoner he condemns to death for wilful murder ; and promise you, that Chrononhotonthologos mentioned your name as loathingly yesterday, when your election was discussed, as if you were a man who dared to be a Whig in the most Tory of times ; or as if you had been convicted at Hexington of breaking into any other house than the Commons ; instead of (saving your honourable membership's presence) licking the spittle of government."

By this time the mind of Sir Alexander was becoming enlightened.

"I will venture twenty to one," said he, turning a deaf ear to the sauciness of his

companion, "that if Lord Powderham abused me much, he abused Baltimore more?"

"Exactly! And pray what have you both been doing to raise such a typhoon in the mill-pond?"

But like Margaret on a former occasion, Sir Alexander did not at present feel entitled to publish the attachment between Baltimore and his cousin.

"Let me answer your question by another," said he. "Is it true that the owner of Baltimore Castle and twenty thousand a-year, is likely to take the benefit of the act?"

"Lord Powderham? — Why I should think he *was* rather hard up, by the prodigious pains he takes to make me think the contrary. They want to marry Baltimore, it seems, to Lord Spadeshill's crooked daughter, who is to inherit his barony of Frant and ten thousand a-year. Did not you understand his hint, the other day, about getting the Spadeshills invited to the Pavilion, in case the king went to Brighton?"

"I seldom understand hints. I only wish

people who want anything of *me* would speak out," cried Erskine, annoyed to hear of so serious an obstacle to the prospects of Georgiana.

"And having this Darby-and-Joan crotchet in his head," resumed Midge, carefully watching the effect his observation might have on his companion, "Lord Powderham thinks, perhaps, that Balty's visits to South Street are a *leetle* too frequent."

"Faith! he is right enough there!" said Sir Alexander, in a tone of exultation quite incomprehensible to the Secretary, who had no acquaintance with Miss Erskine.

"And I suppose he resents upon *you* the influence of the fair lady his wrath is unable to reach."

"Let him resent and be hanged to him!" said the baronet, in a tone of defiance. "All the thunders and anathemas of Baltimore Castle will avail him little against *that* influence!—Baltimore is as fast in the noose as need be!"

With all the suppleness and recklessness of his nature, Midge was a little surprised at this cool avowal! Hitherto he had stood

somewhat in awe of the nice sense of honour of the new member for Hexington. Hitherto, he had fancied that his Iago-like endeavours to stir up the jealousy of Erskine against Michael Cassio Lord Baltimore, had been secretly successful. And now, Othello seemed to glory in the frailty of his Desdemona !—

But that they just then reached the Treasury, where both had business to transact, and were forced to assume the gentlemanly deportment of official decency which none wore with a better grace, Midge would have been puzzled in what tone to reply to the unaccountable vaunt of Sir Alexander.

Meanwhile, had not the latter known himself beyond the reach of Lord Powderham's influence, in what is called "the highest quarter," he might have felt a little alarmed at the vengeance likely to be taken upon him by the Earl, in the event of his son persisting in his projects of alliance with the family. But he knew he had nothing to fear. The favour of the king towards him was undeviating. The straightforwardness of his ways was fully appreciated at

Windsor. It was rare for so good a whist-player to exhibit such exemplary simplicity of character as Erskine; and as formerly in the case of peninsular tactics, in the ordinary routine of life George the Fourth knew he could always rely upon his testimony. When perplexed by misgivings touching the authenticity of ministerial or newspaper intelligence, a simple answer from the man too unimaginative to deceive himself or others, often decided his majesty's opinion.

Sir Alexander had reason to congratulate himself on this security, when it soon afterwards transpired that Lord Baltimore was on a visit to Carrolstown Castle, as the avowed suitor of Miss Erskine!—

Though somewhat slow both in his perceptions and resolutions, Lord Baltimore's determinations, once taken, were steadfast. On his road into Wales, while reflecting on the agitating incidents of the last few days, he accused his own supineness as the cause of affliction both to Margaret and Georgiana. Grateful towards the former as the generous fosterer of his attachment,

he felt guilty of heinous ingratitude in not having disproved, as well as disclaimed, the cruel charges made against her by his father.

“That excellent wife and mother deserved better of us!” was his exclamation ; and could he have surmised that the false inferences of Baltimore Castle were founded on the false witnessing of its private secretary, Midge might have quaked in his well-varnished shoes.

But it was not too late to redress the wrongs of Margaret ; and, sincerely persuaded that this was the leading motive of his conduct, he determined to hurry over to Ireland,—offer his too long irresolute hand to Miss Erskine,—and leave her to decide whether the prospect of lordly starvation, (that is, an income of fifteen hundred a-year,) were more acceptable than the bread of dependence from a brother-in-law. With lover-like sophistry, though his heart was palpitating with the joy of his recently-acquired assurance of Georgiana’s affection, he approached Carrolstown Castle with a firm persuasion that the object of his jour-

ney was to perform an act of justice towards the innocent Lady Erskine. Luckily, he found in the object of his love, a person to whom Margaret was so dear, that, instead of resenting such a view of the case, Georgiana Erskine was still more vehement than himself in indignation against the authors of the calumny.

And thus, it happened that from the thorns planted by the industrious mischief of Midge, grapes were gathered. Georgiana so fully coincided with her admirer in the duty of rendering prompt justice to one so vilely traduced, that the woman who had been for four years past devotedly attached to Lord Baltimore, accepted the hand of the man who had been for four years passionately in love with Georgiana Erskine, because, as they mutually assured each other, it would be shameful to increase the domestic cares of their excellent friend. They agreed, in short, to be poor and miserable together for her sake ; and, once resolved upon this desperate purpose, it began to appear a little extraordinary to both that the rash act should have been so long delayed. After

accomplishing, twice told, his years of discretion, Lord Baltimore admitted it was somewhat late in life to have submitted to parental prohibition.

No one disapproved, except Lord and Lady Powderham. The world decided it to be a well-assorted match ; the Carrolstowns, Wakehursts, and Erskines, to be a very happy one. Neither bride nor bridegroom was of a disposition to defer the accomplishment of their intentions to the idle vanity of preparing wedding-clothes and wedding-carriages, inconsistent in splendour with their present limited means. And thus, about the period when Sir Alexander Erskine was taking his seat in the House, as representative of the government borough of Hexington, Lord and Lady Baltimore were taking theirs once more by the fireside in South Street ; the papers of the preceding week having announced the grand festivities consequent upon their nuptials at Carrolstown Castle ; and those of the preceding day their arrival in town, “ at the mansion of their brother-in-law, Mr. Wakehurst, in Berkeley Square.”

“Such is my reward,” growled Lord Powderham, as he pointed out the offensive paragraph to his Countess, “for all the favours I have lavished upon those Erskines. Paupers, whom I raised out of the mire,—vipers, whom I have cherished to sting me!—But we have not yet closed accounts.—Sir Alexander may find that luck is not all in this world. I heard rumours this morning, of a fatal event that will fall upon no one more heavily than upon Sir Alexander Erskine!”

PART VIII.

“WERE I not afraid of being twitted with my former professions of contempt for this world’s goods,” said Lady Baltimore to her lord, some six weeks after their marriage, as they were progressing through the delicious month of May and delicious south of France,—“I would say, ‘Would to God we were rich.’”

“So soon out of conceit with poverty?” said her husband, affectionately taking her hand, as they reclined, side by side, in their comfortable travelling-carriage. “What other man’s goods have been tempting you, dear Georgy, into the sin of covetousness?—The pair of Lancrets you discovered yesterday in the old broker’s shop on the quay at Avignon?”—

“Fie upon you, fie upon you!” exclaimed Georgiana. “When I have not yet had

an opportunity of ascertaining the merits or deficiencies of your gallery at Baltimore Castle. You may possess a whole wilderness of Lancrets, for anything I know to the contrary.—No ! I was thinking of poor, dear Margaret ; and regretting that *she* could not participate in the blessing of these southern breezes.”

“I fear with you,” said Lord Baltimore, in a saddened tone, “that they are most essential to her. Lady Erskine was looking very ill when we left town.”

“If she could only have spent a few quiet months with us at Hyères or Montpellier,” said Georgiana, earnestly.

“You do not suppose that, even had we possessed house and home to offer her, she would have left her husband and children ?”

“Such of the children as are not at school should have accompanied her,” answered Lady Baltimore, “had I possessed the Fortunatus’s purse to which I was alluding. The girls I love for their own sakes—Harry, because he is your god-child and mine ; (his christening, if you remember, was the first

circumstance that brought us together). As to Harry's father, one of the greatest advantages I pictured to myself for Margaret in the expedition, was to lose sight, for a time, of my cousin Alick."

"A pretty doctrine, truly, to be set forth by a lady scarcely out of her honeymoon," cried Lord Baltimore, pressing to his lips, as warmly as he had ever done by proxy, the hand he was holding. "I fear, however, I must echo your views of the case. I would not give much for the comfort she is ever likely to obtain from the conduct or company of Erskine. Never was I so mistaken in any human being as in that man."

"Not mistaken in the man: mistaken in your faith in the stability of human nature. Alick has been tempted by great vicissitudes of fortune; and the frailty of his character has been made manifest. Had he not been greatly tried, he would not have signally erred. He was intended for a lower walk of life; for moderate purposes,—for domestic peace. If you take a reed from its humble place by the river side, and plant it on an exceeding high

mountain, you need not be surprised to see it shaken by the wind."

"Bravo, my special pleader for the honour of the Erskines!" cried Lord Baltimore. "Well, well! I plead guilty. Believe me, I often feel disagreeably responsible for Erskine's follies. I would compound with the responsibility as regards money matters, or the foolish vanity that leads him into the company of such fellows as Henry Greatoux or John Hall; but I am wretched when I think of the misery, past, present, and to come, of his excellent wife."

"At this rate, I shall begin to share your father's suspicions, and grow jealous of dear Margaret!" retorted his wife with a smile. "Seriously, the only drawback to my delight at quitting England for this charming tour and getting out of the way of family resentments, was the feeling that our poor friend would be left alone with her troubles,—counting among them, her husband."

"It is well she does not hear you!"

"I suppose I should undergo the fate of him who interfered between Sganarelle and his wife! But Margaret's blind devotedness

ought not to deceive the judgment of others; and I am sure you will agree with me, that there is more worth,—more truth,—more nobleness in her little finger, than in the whole united circle of Alexander's showy associates."

Lord Baltimore, who was musing over the probable destinies of this excellent Margaret, was provokingly silent.

"When, *when*," resumed his wife, "will justice ever be distributed between the stronger and weaker sex! So long as *men* monopolize the right of erecting statues to the great, or decreeing mural crowns to the good, to *men* will they always be decreed! But before the tribunal that is not of this world, the strength of virtue which enables a woman to discharge cheerfully and strenuously the fireside duties of a thankless life, will surely outweigh the blood-stained glories of the hero, or the noisy orations of the patriot!"

Her husband watched her enthusiasm with a smile.

"Well, well," said she, in reply to his looks, "let us talk of the Erskines. Consider how much worse it will be with them,

should the rumour of the king's illness we heard at Lyons prove well founded."

"Ay! were George the Fourth to die, Erskine might as well bury himself in the same grave in St. George's Chapel!" responded her husband. "But we will not think of such a thing. On every account, and in every point of view, the event would be most disastrous."

The danger, however, was whispered to be imminent. The pertinacity of the courtiers in denying the king's illness, convinced those versed in courtly tactics that all hope was at an end.

But Sir Alexander Erskine was not one of the speculators. His heart was too deeply interested in the event, to admit of his occupying himself with its political aspect. Still less did he at present trouble himself about his own stake in the result. Loyalty was one of the few meritorious feelings unextinguished in his heart. It was an hereditary virtue; fostered in his infancy by all the enthusiasm consequent on a great national quarrel. His grandfather had died, and his father ruined himself, in support

of the royal cause, in the face of the most trying of all the duties of loyalty—the spilling of kindred blood ; and the feeling thus inculcated by parental precept and example, had been strengthened in Erskine’s case by great and undeserved favour on the part of the dying king

And thus, the man who had outlived all gratitude towards wife and friend, was preserved from a further fault by investing his more recent patron with the sacred attributes of royalty ; and no one watched with more heartfelt anxiety than Sir Alexander Erskine, every variation in the symptoms of the king.

Yet while he was thus watching, scrutinizing bulletins and hanging upon the looks and words of royal physicians for a glimmering of hope, there was a gentle sufferer in his own anxious home, declining almost as rapidly. Every day, when, if not in attendance at Windsor, he came home from White’s or the House of Commons with news of some slight change, some trifling amendment, disclosing the intelligence to his wife and children, as though it were their duty to receive

it on their bended knees,—he forgot to notice, while relating it, how much more emaciated than the preceding week was the face that smiled upon him,—how much fainter the voice that exerted itself to echo his gratitude to heaven for a decrease of the sufferings of his sovereign.

His daughter Lily was amazed that, keenly alive as he seemed to every variation of the royal countenance, he should be apparently blind to the fever exhausting the strength of her mother. Not that the thought of danger crossed her inexperienced mind. But she felt that some strong remedy or active measure ought to be immediately resorted to. But how was the harassed husband to give his thoughts to an ailing wife? His duties as a member, as a placeman, as a courtier, monopolized his thoughts.

Adolphus Midge, who, since the existence of a feud between the Baltimore and Erskine families, (dreading to lose the meat in his mouth by snatching at the shadow of Sir Alexander's favour in the water,) somewhat relaxed in his intimacy in South Street now

that both meat and shadow were becoming alike unsubstantial, and that his secretaryship was about to dissolve into thin air, ventured to show the light of his countenance anew to his old friend.

“ By Jove, I’m afraid ’tis all up with us !” said he. “ If the king drop, the Tories won’t be in six months. Any one behind the scenes will tell you the same thing. Even should he recover, I doubt our getting through another session. But as sure as we live by anything but bread,—Toryism will fall to the ground with its High Priest.”—

The Peninsular captain of course muttered, in contraversion of such High Priesthood, the name of Wellington : while the Treasury hack arrayed himself against a mere dogma of faith, with the demonstrations and technicalities of his trade.

“ A dissolution settles the business !” said he. “ The next Parliament will carry the Reform question ; and Reform once carried, will cause the whole political frame of Europe to tingle to its finger-ends ! Impossible to foresee the extent of the mischief !

We shall have a Champ de Mai in Hyde Park, and the mob singing ‘*Ca ira*,’ (or ‘Go it, my boys!’) while they level the ground. *Then*, my dear Erskine, *then* look to your sinecure!—I wouldn’t take five thousand pounds to insure it six months after the Whigs come into office. They *must* buy popularity in the country by thinning out-standing abuses, such as pensions and sinecures!”

“Time enough to make my moan for that hereafter,” said Sir Alexander, whose spirits were not raised by these prognostications.

“No such thing. Those whose dependence is upon office, cannot take the subject too steadily into their hands, or examine it too earnestly. Don’t deceive yourself by the hollow magnanimity of words. All that is passing is only too real. Beware of the darker realities that follow!”

“I do not understand you?” — said Sir Alexander, gravely.

“In plain words, my dear fellow, make haste and feather your nest, before all the feathers are moulted. There is a government, vacant, that would be the very thing

for you. Not a political place ;—you might hold it both as a staunch Tory and military man.—Take my advice.—*Ask* for it.—Address yourself at once to the king. He still attends to business. Next week, it may be too late.”

“ Ask him for an appointment that would necessitate my removal from his household ? ”—

“ *His* household !—when you know that his days are numbered ! ”—

“ And you would have me harass them by this signal mark of disrespect ?—You would have me ask for his safe-conduct to ratify my desertion ?—I *could* not do such a thing !—Were it to save my family from begging their bread, I couldn’t and wouldn’t.”

“ Then your family have little to thank you for. My dear Erskine, you do not sufficiently stick to the positive. All very well for a man like Balty to romance and play the visionary, who is heir-intail to thirty thousand a-year. *You* can’t afford it. The fact is, that like half of our besotted party, you cannot bring home to yourself the possibility of abiding on the northern

side of the hill. The consequences of a political reverse are out of your calculations. You have so long dieted on loaves and fishes, manna and quails, that the valley of dry bones seems a mere allegory. You fancy that even when the Whigs are in, the Tories, from force of habit, will still creep, cat-like, about the fusty passages of the Treasury.—No such thing!—Our mousing days are over, and our skins about to be taken from us, and given to the Medes and Persians,—*id est*, the Whigs and Radicals.”

“Do not trifle with such bitter earnest!”—said Sir Alexander, peevish with the terrible weight of his responsibilities.

“Nay, it is you whom I cannot persuade to be in earnest, cried the Secretary. “I would fain inscribe my next official letter to you as an Excellency; or ’faith, I may some day or other have to address one to the King’s Bench.”

Erskine winced at the prophecy. Less probable ones have come to pass!—

Nevertheless, he stood firm. The government to which Midge alluded (that of a military colony, and within scope of his abili-

ties) was given to a man with less interest, and less occasion for its exercise. But Sir Alexander had the comfort of feeling that, with the chivalry of a true gentleman, he had sacrificed his prospects to the dictates of loyal duty ; a consciousness that would have done him more honour had not six helpless children been dependant on him for support.

Few of the many who had sunned themselves in the smiles of George the Fourth, watched their extinction with deeper sympathy ; and could anything have increased his depression of spirits when, the fatal decree having gone forth, the great bell of St. Paul's announced to the metropolis that it was submitted to the sceptre of a new sovereign, it would have been the heartless stir and bustle prevalent in a city at the commencement of a new reign.

The clubs were in ecstacies !—So much to be given away !—Such fighting for the spoils—such pæans on the part of the victors !—From the air of general hilarity, a savage from the woods, accidentally visiting London, could scarcely have been brought to

believe that the father of the people lay in his coffin!—

Everybody was canvassing. Everybody was surmising the results of a canvass more important perhaps to the destinies of the nation, than the preliminaries of any preceding parliament. Sir Alexander Erskine, having lost his place in the household, would also be certain to lose his seat in the House,—Lord Powderham having other views for the disposal of the borough of Hexington.

“I told you so!” whispered Adolphus Midge, as he announced the fact. “And I am afraid the seat is an object to you!”

The disappointed man did not care to tell him how much he was afraid so too, or of how many other things besides.

“Try your interest in some other quarter,” said Dodo, coolly mending his pen. “You have so *many* friends!”

“Perhaps *you* could put me in the way of a seat?”—inquired Erskine, who was becoming chilled to the marrow.

“If you can afford to lay down three thousand pounds for it, I think I *might*,” replied Midge, with an air of cogitation.

“ Government has its hands full. With so many new people forced upon it, you have no chance from government.—But why not try your own luck ?”

Sir Alexander did not answer, that were he able to lay down three thousand pounds for a seat in parliament, he would pay his debts at once, and dispense with it: and having received a further hint from Dodo that mere “ ayes ” like himself grew on every bush, and that the Treasury could not afford to throw away a borough on a dumbmy, he judged it wiser to seek the aid of some more merciful adviser.

But already, listeners were becoming less patient. The man who has the ear of the king, finds auditors in his turn; but now, the conversation of Sir Alexander Erskine was becoming as “ weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable ” as the prose of any other man. People observed to each other, shrugging their shoulders, when his back was turned, that “ they could not imagine why the deuce he *wanted* to get into parliament !—He was not a man of a political turn,—he was not a man of talent.”—

One of his club-acquaintances, however, was at length kind enough to point out a quarter where he was likely to be successful; offering not only his advice, but his assistance.

“With a few hundred pounds, I could bring you in for ——wich!” said he. “One of my family usually sits for it; but none of them are just now prepared to come forward; and I think I can venture to promise, that in such a stronghold of Toryism, our nominee would be brought in for a song.”

Impossible to say what he *might* have been “brought in” for! Sir Alexander Erskine, who lost his election, was *minus* eight hundred pounds by the attempt; and all the consolation he obtained from the officious adviser who had attempted to increase his local consequence at his expense, was, that “he might think himself lucky, *as matters had turned out*, he was not in for five thousand!”

Matters had turned out exactly as every one conversant with that singular science called parliament-making had predicted;—

as his friend Midge good-naturedly informed him, a few days after the close of the poll.

Trying enough to make his re-appearance in St. James's Street, and be saluted by the same friendly nods which had conveyed congratulations on his success six months before,—*now* translatable into, "How are you, Erskine; sorry you've lost your election!"

A few of those more deeply-interested in his prospects, stopped short to add to these condolences—"But there's still an opening in such or such a place!"—pointing out some remote spot in Ireland or Scotland, where a thousand or two more might be expended, with an equally remote chance of success.—But experience had made him wise.

From Midge, he was unable even to obtain this stale crumb of consolation. Midge was undergoing a fit of those spasms which convulse the underlings of office during the progress of every general election. Midge had not a gleam of sympathy, or moment of time, for him. His room at the Treasury was beset by new faces. The un-

seated member was no longer as one of the party. A voteless man,

What business had he there at such a time ?

Without family influence, without fortune, without genius to supply the want of them, the mote gilded by a temporary sunbeam, has only to return to its obscurity in the shade.—The ex-whist player was superseded !—

It was only at home, in his dull house in South Street, that he was *entitled* to sympathy. But even there, he could not hope to attain it in the form he wanted. His children attached no definite meaning to the words—“Poor papa has lost his election !” And how was he to find courage for apprizing Margaret of the full extent to which that loss imported his destiny and their own ?—

Never had he become really cognizant of the precariousness of his condition, till he examined the countenance of his wife, with the view of ascertaining whether she had bodily as well as moral strength to hear—“I have lost my place—I have lost my election. We possess seven hundred a-year,

nearly six of which are derived from a sinecure the suppression of which is predicted, and are living at the rate of two thousand per annum, with debts amounting to five thousand pounds !”

When he saw her so pale, so weak, so tremulous, such a disclosure to its full extent, became out of the question. It sufficed for him to look graver than usual, for *her* cheek to become ghastly ; and when he hazarded an angry reproof to little Harry, Margaret’s breath came so short, that he feared she was about to faint.

The utmost he could venture, therefore, was to hint that his creditors were clamorous ; and that the loss of his election exposed him to proceedings hitherto undreaded. It might be as well, he said, if he quitted town for a time.

“And why should we not all go ? Why not at once break up this expensive establishment ?”—inquired Margaret, in a faltering voice.

“To give up the house, and sell my furniture, would bring every claimant upon my shoulders,” was his abrupt reply.

“But could we not *let* the house?”

“And retire *whither?*”—

Lady Erskine could scarcely refrain from reminding him that Dr. Wilson had prescribed a southern climate as essential to her recovery; and that the Baltimores were eager she should join them abroad. She contented herself, however, with murmuring something about a small cottage in the country.

“Easy talking, my dear Margy!” cried Erskine, whose conscience, perhaps, supplied the suggestion from which her delicacy had recoiled. “But for the removal of a family like ours, ready money is indispensable; and where am I to find it?—People are always to be found ready to advance a thousand pounds to a man like Baltimore, at ten per cent. A poor fellow like myself, could scarcely command a hundred, at fifty. I *know* it,—for I have tried!”

Margaret shuddered. She was unable to repress a glance towards the four lovely children, seated round a table at the further end of the room; the girls with their arms enlaced, showing a picture-book to little

Harry, whom they were trying to keep quiet lest he should disturb the conversation between his parents. *She* knew that the fearful amount of debt announced by her husband did not comprise *all* their liabilities. She knew how long it was since she had dared apply to him for money on the children's account.

“The best thing I can do, therefore,” said he, trying to repress her alarms by assumed unconcern, “is to hasten off with Henry Greatoux to the moors, till matters can be arranged with the people most likely to molest me. I have friends about the person of the king, who is a kind-hearted man, and if apprized of the importance of the appointment I have lost to a family-man like myself, may perhaps see me otherwise provided for. In fact, but for the animosity of Lord Powderham, I am told it would have been done already.”

“And if, during your absence in Scotland,”—Margaret attempted to begin—but her voice failed her.

“If, during my absence in Scotland,” added her husband coolly, “any of these

people should annoy you, I have left instructions with my solicitor what course to pursue."

"You have already made arrangements, then, to go?" said Margaret, who had falsely flattered herself the plan was proposed for her approbation.

"Yes! I start with Greatoux in the morning, before the news of my defeat gets wind. I have everything to fear from that accursed cousin of Midge's, who fancies I did not serve him with the king, when he applied to me last year for—no matter what!—I will leave you money, Margy, for current expenses. Before I come back, I trust our prospects will have brightened."

He went; and within two days there was an execution in the house! Before an answer could arrive from the Highlands to the intimation conveyed to him by his solicitors, five days must elapse. There were no railroads in those days to waft a lawyer's letter from Indus to the Pole.

Yet so heavily did it please Providence to visit, at that juncture, the little household in South Street, that even with sheriff's

officers in the house, Lady Erskine took no more heed of them than though they were a portion of the household furniture over which they were asserting a claim.

The little boy, the darling of the house, was in danger of his life. The high spirits his sisters had found it so difficult to control the evening preceding his father's departure from town, were produced by the excitement of incipient fever.

It was only to the prudent old nurse, however, that Dr. Wilson ventured to communicate the extent of the evil.

"Too late now," said he, "to separate the child from his sisters. But it is a case of malignant scarlet fever, and I fear the worst. At such a moment, too! However, Sir Alexander has been written to about this other unfortunate affair, and he will, doubtless be here to-morrow or next day."

The nurse thought otherwise; and the nurse proved right. The father of the family, unwilling to venture his person in town, obtained temporary assistance from his bankers and men of business, which, by the signature of a *cognovit*, enabled him to

discharge the present claim ; and contented himself with the certainty that the departure of the sheriff's officers, and the affectionate letter he addressed to his wife, would suffice for her reassurement.

That letter found her watching beside the breathless body of her idolized child ! Her daughter Lily read it to her again and again, without succeeding in rousing her attention to a syllable of the contents.

“ I told you, Sir, master wouldn't come,” sobbed the nurse to Dr. Wilson. “ And now, five more days must pass before we get him here. What will become of my poor dear lady ! ”

“ Send for the nearest relations of the family,” said the physician, to whom such emergencies were familiar.

But the nearest relations known to the nurse, Lady Carrolstown and her sisters, were in Ireland, Yorkshire, or Italy. As to the intimate friend suggested by the doctor as an alternative, the nurse was forced to avow, that “ Missus was a lady as lived entirely to herself and for her family ;” and that the bosom friends of Sir Alexander,

Lord Henry Greatoux, and Sir John Hall, were with him on the moors.

Dr. Wilson next demanded the name of Sir Alexander Erskine's man of business.

“*Somebody* must act,—*something* must be done!” said he, almost angrily. And in conjunction with the solicitors, who seemed to think they had enough on their hands of Sir Alexander Erskine's affairs in discharging the writ, he issued orders for the funeral of the poor child, who might as well have been fatherless.

By the time the distressed man arrived post-haste from Scotland, the boy was closed in his coffin, and one of the girls sickening with that fatal malady. By the blessing of Heaven, however, Lily having gone through the disorder in her early years, was able to comfort and assist the most miserable of mothers.

“As soon as your little girl is convalescent,” was the doctor's injunction to the horror-struck Sir Alexander, a few hours after his arrival in his distracted home, — “let me beg of you to remove your family from this infected house. I will not answer

for Lady Erskine's life or reason, without change of air and scene."

The opinion thus expressed became unanswerable after an interview with his wife. Margeret took no heed of his arrival. She had taken none when they led her away from the bedside of the enshrouded child. Nay, she,—the active, forethinking, untirable mother, — heard with apparent unconcern from the nurse, that her second girl was suffering from the same terrible malady which, in a few days' time, had carried off her brother.—*Nothing* could rouse her.—Mind and body were worn out.

And now for the first time, the helpless Erskine felt what it was to have the weight of the family upon his hands: no one to watch for them; no one to work for them; no one, with tender hand, to avert from their path the thorns of life. Hitherto, no earnest eyes of childhood had been fixed upon him, imploring counsel and support: hitherto the burthen and heat of the day had been borne by another. Henceforward, he must bear them alone.

Still the case had not been pronounced

hopeless. It was only by his own fears he was forewarned that a withered plant could as easily resume its verdure, as Margaret the impulses of health. It was his duty, therefore, as much as his interest, to leave no means untried for her restoration. He *must* obey the counsels of the physician.

But how? Little Helen was already out of danger. At the end of a week, at that favourable season of the year, they might remove to the sea-side, or the neighbourhood of town, if means were only forthcoming. Every nerve must be strained to accomplish this vital purpose. Instead, therefore, of sitting hopelessly down to indulge his grief for his favourite child, as he would have done had Margaret been up and stirring to minister to the survivors, he exerted himself to gather together the money that remained to him; trusting the little fund left with his wife at parting, was still unexhausted. To apply to *her* on the subject was impossible.—The state of stupor in which she was plunged, remained unchanged.

“ Where does your mother keep her va-

luables!" he inquired of Lily; (for since they resided in South Street the habits of Margaret were no longer familiar to him as formerly). But the word was almost unintelligible to the little girl, who had never seen that tender mother affix a value to the things of this world, whether small or great; such of her affections as were not set on things above, being centred in her children. Still, the child was able to point out a drawer in her mother's room which was always kept locked; and to which she had once or twice, when restless at night, noticed her mother repair as to a sanctuary, ere she betook herself to her pillow.

Mistaken enough to suppose that such treasure as moth or rust might corrupt or thieves break through and steal, would be thus reverently visited by a woman like Margaret, Sir Alexander was about to unlock the drawer, in the eager hope of finding the little pocket-book and its store of bank-notes, still untouched.

His hand trembled as he placed the key within the lock. His heart grew faint as he was about to invade the sacred depository

of one no longer capable of self-defence.—It was like desecrating a church.—It was like rifling the property of the dead!—Unwittingly he peered anxiously around him through the obscurity of the room, to satisfy himself that no prying eyes were fixed upon him from some remote corner,—like some midnight plunderer, in fear of the testimony of human witnessing, and the retributive terrors of the law.

The guilty soul recoil'd in apprehension
That guiltiness can know no solitude,—
That the blank air itself 's instinct with life !—

But there was none present to watch,—none to denounce him. He found concealed in the sanctum of Margaret's domestic affections only the few books presented to her father by his pupils; a ragged family-bible, in which the date of her birth had been inscribed by the hand of her mother, and the births of all her darlings, by her own;—with a bunch of withered Forget-me-nots—the first he had ever presented to her in the Bournefields—placed as a mark between the leaves. Such were the memorials of

the first and last affections of her broken heart.

The consciousness that his wife lay insensible on the bed before him, and his unburied child in the adjoining room, had not produced so terrible an emotion in his heart as the sight of that simple record of devoted love. An iron ligature seemed to repress the swelling of his breast.

After some minutes' indulgence of his grief, he was about, with pious reverence, to close the drawer, when his eye fell upon a packet bearing his name. Already he had forgotten, in the anguish of his soul, the purpose for which he had invaded that sanctuary of love. But trusting that the parcel might contain either money, or the few trinkets he had forced on Margaret's acceptance during his days of prosperity, he tore it open. Alas! he found only the miniatures of his parents, and a few family relics, which, though at Apston he had attached so much importance to them, had ever since wholly escaped his recollection!

Deprived of his last hope, the miserable man threw himself with clasped hands into

a chair, to meditate on all the evil that was past, and all that was to come. Hitherto he had thought so much of himself,—had been so vain of the generous excess of love which induced him to stoop to Margaret's level in order to make her his wife ; and now, he could not but ask himself, Which of them had been true to that marriage vow?—which of them had proved firmest in affection, and noblest of nature?—which of them had borne with most submission the searchings of adversity,—or with most equanimity and integrity, the far more trying ordeal of riches and honour? The woman extended yonder on her death-bed,—the plant he had let wither away, unrefreshed by the dews of peace, unvisited by the sunshine of joy,—was nobleness itself compared with her wretched husband.

But the train of reveries which took him back to those Apston days, to the baseness and destitution of which he seemed to be returning, providentially recalled to his mind the rich kinswoman by whom that misery had been so cruelly disregarded ; and with the fate of Margaret before his eyes, he

no longer hesitated to sit down and address her in terms of humbleness and supplication. Taking the miniature of his mother from its case, and enclosing it in his letter, he appealed to her only surviving sister for the means of preserving the mother of his children from the grave.

“Alas ! the concession came too late, and he humbled himself in vain ! Two days afterwards the miniature was returned to him by Miss Toddles ; who apprised him that “her respected friend at the White House was no longer in a state to attend to his application, having been recently afflicted with a third paralytic stroke.” By the date of her letter, the toady seemed to be already in authority and enjoyment of the property.

It was no moment to be surprised or shocked. The absorbing feeling of that hour of trial was despair ! On his return from laying the head of his child in the grave, the mourner was arrested by a petty claimant, who rightly judged that, at such a moment, even enemies would become friends to assist in restoring him to liberty. But

this bitter blow was comparatively unfelt. To return to that desolate home, and feel the impossibility of removing the poor saddened children from the room so lately rendered awful to their little hearts by the paraphernalia of death, and still more, of affording the balmy air of the country to Margaret's exhausted frame, left all other grievances unfelt.

"When my poor wife gets a little stronger," said he to Dr. Wilson, as if he thought it necessary to apologize to the physician for non-compliance with his injunctions, "I will take her down to my cousin Mr. Wakehurst's for a week or two, where she will be away from the children, and quiet."

The doctor replied only by a grave incredulous shake of the head. Nor had Sir Alexander courage to inquire whether his good intentions were doubted, or whether the remedy would be applied too late. The conscience-struck husband *dared* not ascertain the worst.

It was only the old nurse who, though absorbed in grief for her lost nursling, found courage to speak out.

“’Tis no mortal use, sir, talking of change of air for my lady,” said she, “or change of doctor’s stuff. She is in the hands of the Almighty, sir. If ever my lady rises from that bed again, it can only be by a miracle!”

With Lily and her little sisters weeping before his eyes, Erskine might perhaps be excused for thinking, that to the prayers of those innocent creatures such a miracle might be vouchsafed. For if holiness and excellence,—if faith and works united,—could propitiate the wrath of God, Margaret might surely be spared to her children,—spared to himself,—spared to be made happy by his renewed affection,—his avowals of having sinned against Heaven, and in her sight.

He could not, and would not, despair! Instead of allowing his little daughter to resume her post as nurse, he took his place by Margaret’s sick bed, as she had so often done by his own. No one but the old attendant who had warned him so earnestly, was allowed to share his task. No one had access to the house; no one tried, indeed, to *obtain* access to the house. The

hand of death was upon it. According to popular report, Lady Erskine was dying of the fever which had already proved fatal to her child.

How often, while these heart-rending scenes were occurring in South Street, how often did Lord Baltimore and his bride, while luxuriating in the delicious atmosphere of Italy, revert to the friend they loved, and repine after her society. "Perhaps," said Georgiana, when intelligence reached them of the courtly changes consequent upon the death of the king,—“perhaps, now my cousin Alick has lost his appointment, he may be tempted to join us. Though so blind to Margaret's impaired state of health, economy may, perhaps, tempt him to winter abroad.”

Alas! at that moment, her cousin Alick was watching in the chamber of sickness which, for three weeks he had not quitted for as many hours,—listening with painful intentness to the feeble breathing of the sufferer, and the incoherent words which occasionally escaped her lips. He was so afraid she might ask for some comforts, or

indulge in some caprice of sickness, which he was unable to gratify.

But she asked for nothing,—she was so little in the habit of asking! Her nature was so free from covetings, that, even in the utmost disorder of her faculties, a caprice did not suggest itself. The wanderings of her mind were all into the past. The light-headedness of fever carried her back to her early days of trouble and of joy. Amid the watches of the night, he heard her addressing, in the hoarse whispers of her now failing voice, the old cress-woman of the Bournefields. She fancied herself still kneeling and praying amid the terrors of the storm in the old hovel. At other moments, she fancied herself waiting for him among the pastures, under the thicket of maple trees; and the growing tenderness of her heart towards him was confided to herself, 'as to a friend. She spoke of his goodness,—of his graciousness. She spoke of *his* protection, as about to suffice to the safety and happiness of her future life!

And what had he been to the attached

creature who so loved and trusted him, and even in her dying moments loved him still ?
What had he been to her ?

Sometimes, poor Lily increased the measure of his miseries, by suggesting that more ought to be done for her mother : that though Dr. Wilson could suggest no remedy, other advice might be called in. Among the skilful men abounding in London, surely some better counsellor could be found. On one occasion the little girl inflicted still more cruel pain. A ragged cambric handkerchief was given him, to wipe the cold moisture from the brow of the exhausted sufferer.

“Have you nothing better than this for your mother ?”—was his stern inquiry.

“Ours from the nursery, dear papa, have been already used for her,”—was the faltering reply ; “and her own are all in this condition. It was only we who were never allowed to want.”

These were bitter lessons. But under their influence, the soul of the erring man was regenerated. The scales of worldliness fell from his eyes. The leper was

cleansed. Could the poor wasted form, the poor wandering mind, over which he was watching, have been sensible of this change of sentiments, the impulses of life had perhaps been renewed within her; or, at all events, in dying, she would have felt that she had not altogether lived in vain. But the comfort was denied her. She never sufficiently recovered her consciousness to know that the hand which so often raised the pillow under her head, was that which had been of old so fondly clasped in hers,—the stay of her early years, destined at last to smoothe her passage to the grave.

It seemed as if heaven, in its right of vengeance, withheld from him the comfort of knowing that his penitence was accepted, that the tardy remorse of his heart, had, at the eleventh hour, brought forth its fruit.—For she knew her children. Reason was vouchsafed to her to recognise them,—to admonish them with the fond admonishment of a dying mother,—to breathe in their ears the assurance of the faith that was in her,—to entreat their remembrance when she should be cold in the grave.

But of their father, though he lay hiding his sobbing face beside her, she spoke as of one absent ; charging her eldest-born, when all was over, to write to him in Scotland, and tell him that his children were motherless ; not *before*, lest the news should be an interruption to his sport.

“ Never let your poor father be unnecessarily harassed, my own Lily,” murmured she. “ Spare him every care and every sorrow. Watch over his comforts for me, when I am gone, dearest children,—even as I have watched over your own !”

It was in vain he spoke to her, — in vain he pressed her in his arms. Her eye wandered vacantly over his countenance. She was not used to his endearments. It was as something afar off,—something estranged from her, she was accustomed to think of her husband !

“ My poor head seems wandering to-day !” faltered she, as if struggling with the consciousness produced by his appeal to her feelings. I feel as if I should be too late.—*He* will be waiting for me.—The air is so oppressive.—There will be a storm.—I see a

terrible light in the heavens.—I hear a voice calling my name.—Ah ! when—when shall I find rest ?”

It was already found. The unnatural flush that overspread her cheeks as she spoke, the wild lustre that for a moment brightened her eyes, subsided to leave her wasted features colourless, and her looks fixed in death. The wild cry that instantly arose in that miserable chamber, announced that the guardian angel of their lives was gone from among them for evermore !

It would have been no affliction to Margaret could she have surmised, in her lifetime, that her head would be laid as humbly in the grave as though she had never participated in the pomps of life. Vanity was banished from the threshold of her husband, —ambition from his soul. He knew that she was gone to her Father who was in heaven ; what mattered the destination of all that remained of her on earth ? He never quitted the body till it was laid in the grave. He locked the door of her chamber, that no careless hand might be laid on the spot hallowed by her last moments ; and,

on his return from the funeral, took his eldest girl and boy in either hand, and having led them back into the room, told them all their mother had been to him,—all he had been to their mother.

There was no need for him to say, “Would to God I had died for thee, Margaret, my wife!”—His children had seen, from the hour of her death, by how severe a struggle their father clung to life for their sake.

For a harder struggle still was to come. They must quit that house;—they must abide in poverty. The children must confront in their tender years the hard necessities of life in order to atone for the prodigalities of his wantonness.

But the little creatures, as they listened to this sad explanation, threw themselves into his arms, with fond assurances that all this was nothing; that they would bear more—much more—cheerfully for his sake. The spirit of Margaret was already expanding in their young hearts.

Sustained by this mighty consolation, the bereaved man took courage. He determined to dally no longer with the urgencies of his

gloomy fate. He would exert himself. He would wrestle at once with the miseries awaiting him. At his desire, therefore, his daughter fetched from his study the pile of letters which had accumulated during her poor mother's illness.

Sir Alexander shrugged his shoulders. What a task of humiliation awaited him. All appeals from angry creditors,—all remonstrances concerning some breach of pecuniary engagement.

The very first he opened,—one that had arrived that morning,—commenced with—

“Sir,—I am greatly astonished at having received no reply to my last application.”

He looked at the signature, as if seeking to rebuke his own negligence; but to his amazement, it was that of a stranger, and the date of the letter “APSTON!”

It was from the solicitor of his late cousin, expressing surprise at receiving no answer to a letter despatched the preceding week, to apprise him that he had succeeded to an inheritance of 113,000*l.* 3 per cent. consols!

His immediate instructions were solicited

respecting the probate of the will ; executed, it appeared, by the testatrix previous to her first attack of palsy, on the accession of the cousin she was so proud of to the empty honour of a baronetcy.

The first impulse of the bewildered heir was to shut himself up alone in the deserted chamber, into which a mournful autumnal sun was shining as in mockery. At that moment,—the consummation of all his selfish hopes and aspirings,—instead of shouting aloud in the fulness of joy, or breathing a prayer of thankfulness to heaven,—he hid his face in the lonely pillow, to stifle the cry of despair that burst out of the inmost recesses of his heart, “ Too late,—it has come too late ! my precious — precious Margaret ! ”

The cup of joy was offered to his lips in vain. She who, for his sake, had drained to the lees the bitter chalice, no longer abided on the face of the earth to share his hour of compensation !

* * * *

Fourteen years have elapsed since that eventful epoch in the life of Sir Alexander

Erskine; who is now a grey-haired man, or “by’r Lady, inclining to threescore,”—the father of many grandchildren, and loved and respected in his degree,—his degree being that of a country gentleman of competent estate.

For many years past, he has resided wholly in the country; in a pleasant, cheerful house, built under his own direction on the site of Hobart’s Farm, at the extremity of the valley of the Bournefields, and known in the neighbourhood by the name of Apston Lodge.

From the moment of his arrival in the simpering little town of the Severn side, to take possession of his inheritance, the Apstonians seemed to fancy they could not make enough of him, in atonement of their former injuries; and though Sir Alexander was incapable of being blinded by their adulation, he was too desirous to end his days in peace on the spot where the best moments of his life had passed, not to accept the olive-branch, which he has nevertheless continued to hold at arms’-length. When the Reform Bill assigned a seat in

parliament to the town, its wealthiest citizen was solicited to become its representative ; but it was forced to content itself with the grave widower's assurance, that he had retired from public life, at once and for ever.

With his children around him at the White House, he devoted his time to watch the progress of his new mansion, and of the family mausoleum he had obtained the sanction of the diocese to add to the little village church of Bourneham, situated almost within view of his new home. It was a relief to him to dismiss London from his thoughts, connected as it was with painful reminiscences. Not, however, that the little happy circle forgot, or wished to forget, that their best and brightest was gone from among them. But they felt that such a recollection was best cultivated in the country.

The influence of that excellent woman was still strong upon their souls. Lily, the comfort of her father's life, was affianced for two years to an amiable young man, the son of a nobleman of the county, before she

consented to become his wife ; so fully did she discharge the solemn duty imposed upon her by her dying mother, of watching over her sisters till they grew to woman's estate.

Lord and Lady Powderham occasionally visit him in his retreat, and the Wakehursts and Carrolstowns still exchange country visits with "Cousin Alick."

It was only last week, at Baltimore Castle, that Sir Alexander surprised Georgiana and her husband laughing heartily over a speech of Sir Adolphus Midge to his constituents, every comma of which was stiff with the exploded Toryism of the political noviciate of the quondam Sec. But they could not engage him to join in the laugh;—no, not even when his darling Helen appealed to him to admire the absurdity of a partisan more Peelified than Peel!—

"The name of Midge," said he, "is one I would fain efface from my remembrance, as connected with some of the darkest days of my life."

The merriment of Lady Powderdam was silenced in a moment. Even after that lapse

of time, tears rushed into her eyes as she whispered, in a deferential tone to her husband, the name of—"MARGARET!"

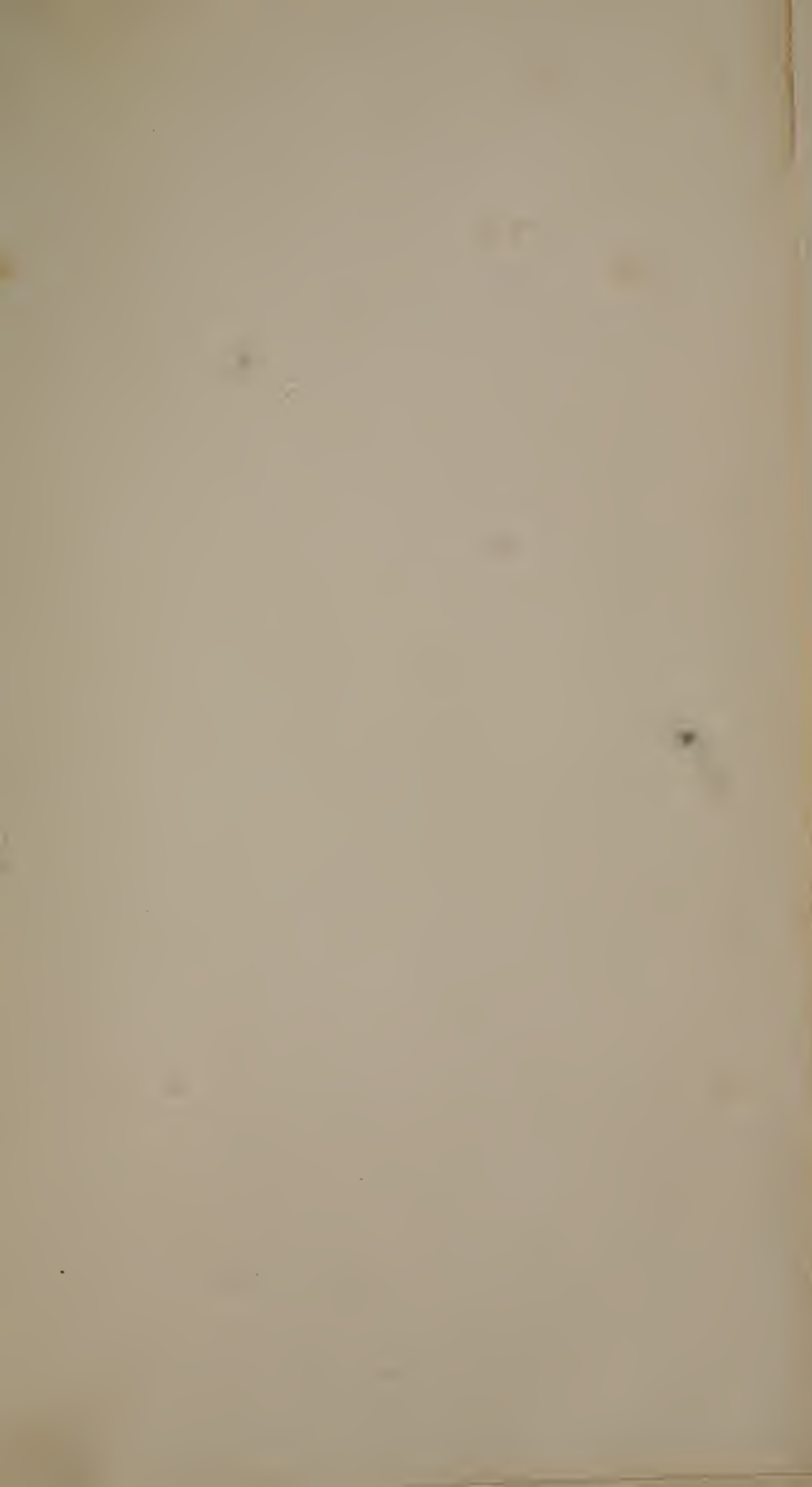
THE END.

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